Table of Contents

1. aesthetics
2. chapter one
3. chapter two
4. chapter three
5. chapter four
6. chapter five
7. chapter six
8. chapter seven
9. chapter eight
10. chapter nine
11. chapter ten
12. chapter eleven
13. chapter twelve
14. chapter thirteen
15. chapter fourteen
16. chapter fifteen
17. chapter sixteen
18. chapter seventeen
19. chapter eighteen
20. chapter nineteen
21. chapter twenty
22. chapter twenty-one
23. chapter twenty-two
24. chapter twenty-three
25. chapter twenty-four
26. chapter twenty-five
27. chapter twenty-six
28. chapter twenty-seven
29. chapter twenty-eight
30. chapter twenty-nine
31. chapter thirty
32. chapter thirty-one
33. chapter thirty-two
34. chapter thirty-three

35. chapter thirty-four
36. chapter thirty-five
37. chapter thirty-six
38. chapter thirty-seven
39. chapter thirty-eight
40. chapter thirty-nine
41. epilogue
42. disclaimer
43. WATTYS FAN CHOICE AWARD

aesthetics

i got bored and was procrastinating <3

HARRISON MCCAMMON

[image]

SEBASTIAN KRAUSE

[image]

... are the BOYS OF WEST DENTON <3

[image]

[image]

Okay, on with the book now. Hehehe.

chapter one

[image]

first time readers check:

returning readers check:

it is contagious, my fear and your pain - saint sister, "corpses"

Harris

It wasn't that I'd never noticed Sebastian Krause before. It's hard not to—he's more like a bird than a boy, with gangly, delicate limbs and a face that pinches in a little too sharply. He's a pale thing too, covered in freckles and moles, contrasted with the darkest, blackest hair you've ever seen. It's all messy curls, jutting about his head every which way, giving him this strange mad scientist look that I'd stare at from the back of classrooms. Always looking, never touching.

But the first time I saw Seb—really, truly *saw* him—it wasn't because of crazy hair or paperweight limbs or a constellation of freckles. It was because he thought he could fly.

It's the first real weekend of the summer, a warm Saturday in West Denton, Minnesota, but not so warm that the water of Lake Franz isn't bound to be freezing to the touch. Most of us mill around the water's edges, passing around whatever alcohol we'd each brought for tonight. Denton is a small town, full of faces I've known my entire life. We're a small graduating class, too—just a little over a hundred or so students. So being here, right after tossing our caps up and getting rid of out of town relatives, feels sacred somehow. This. This is my last summer with these people. And then it's off to ... who even knows what.

Lake Franz isn't too far from the Wetspring Quarry; the quarry's sides are massive hills, secluding the supposedly toxic waters from the rest of the surrounding wildlife. The side closest to the lake juts out onto a stable enough overhang, and that's where I see him standing—his hands raising slowly in an arc above his head, reaching for each other while he tilts his head back, exalting in the balmy twilight air.

Next to me, Liam passes me his already lit cigarette. I hate the menthol kinds he smokes, their slightly minty taste and the consequential aftertaste, but I'm not going to say no to his offering. I inhale the minty smoke, feeling the familiar burn in my chest and the immediate light-headed buzz in my skull. The chill calm that sweeps through my body. I've tried quitting smoking a few times, just like I've tried quitting Liam. I keep going back to both.

"Is that Sebastian Krause?" Liam asks, as though it could be anyone else. Above us, Sebastian's flat chest rises and falls slowly but surely, his lungs expanding inside his ribcage more than I would have thought possible for his slender frame.

I take another puff, then pass the cigarette back, wishing I had my own, and that mine wasn't menthol. "I do believe it is."

"You think he's gonna jump?"

"Well if he does, let's hope he doesn't die. I'm too broke for therapy."

In front of us, a girl with bright blue-dyed highlights whirls around and glares at us. "Shut up, Harris," she snaps at me.

Damn. I didn't see her standing there. I spent all of high school being ignored by Saanvi thanks to her and Liam's constant feuding, but I don't like fucking with people. I'm not Liam. "Sorry, Saanvi. I'm sure your pet giraffe will be fine."

"Maybe he's finally had enough of *you*," Liam offers, smirking. "If I had to talk to you regularly, God knows I'd have jumped off a cliff a long fucking time ago."

"Oh, go fuck yourself," Saanvi says, and turns back around to watch

her best friend as he lingers on the cliff's edge. For a second, I legitimately believe that she's unbothered, until I notice her hands resting on her waist, Wonder Woman posing through her worry. That's a perk of a small town, I think—you know people better than either of you think you do. And Saanvi Gaddam is on edge.

Off to the side, Liam is already disinterested, scrolling through his phone, cigarette burning free in his other hand. The scent of burning paper and tobacco mingles with the natural smells of the lake; the algae resting atop the clear water's surface near the reeds, the bonfires lit up on the wet gravel around the lakeside, the faint smell of spilled alcohol.

People begin noticing Sebastian, his hands still raised above his head.

"I wish he'd stop doing yoga and just jump already if he's gonna," Liam mutters next to me, and I pointedly ignore the comment. Sebastian's hair rustles in the breeze, and he takes one barefooted step forward, toward the cliff's edge.

This is very out of character for Sebastian Krause.

Another foot forward. I see Saanvi suck in a breath.

I don't know why I do it.

Before I can fully comprehend what I'm doing, my legs are moving of their own accord, bolting around the lake's edge. My steps crunch in the gravel, until my flip flops soar off my feet. The bare soles of my feet scrabble to find purchase for a moment. I'm definitely a little bit drunk. Bile pushes up in the back of my throat. I don't quite know what I'm doing, I just know I'm doing it.

The gravel soon lets up to a grassy knoll. It's just as bad as the gravel, but I can't stop, and I can't tear my eyes off Sebastian. His lithe form is now at the cliff's edge, and I can hear our schoolmates —former schoolmates—egging him on, a drunken cacophony begging to see the fragile boy jump.

I'm right behind him. I'm just trying to figure out the best way to

tackle him, to get him away from that cliff's edge. If I tackle him charging at him like I am now, we'll both fall. I slow down so I can grab him without sending us both toppling.

"Sebastian!"

Sebastian doesn't turn.

Just jumps.

Saanvi's scream fills my ears.

I get a running start and follow Sebastian off the cliff's edge.

The sound of everyone's mad cheering is distorted by the whooshing of air in my ears. My body crashes into the freezing cold water. The breath spills out of my lungs, and I have to force myself not to suck in any of the clear, deep blue lake water.

I surge to the surface, my shirt rising up to the top of the waves. Luckily this cold water is sobering. I scan the water for Sebastian.

It takes a few seconds. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I should have taken that free lifeguard training offered by our school, I just never thought to. I can hear my heartbeat thudding in my ears, accompanied by the nervous chitter chatter of the kids lining the shore.

Finally, Sebastian's head breaks the surface, and he splashes around, wild, slender arms turning up the lake water. He gasps in a large breath and coughs out the water that accompanied it.

"Are you okay?" I shout, swimming over to him. My head feels somewhat detached to my body; I'm just so cold, yet I don't really feel it. Probably adrenaline.

Sebastian's gaze swivels. He seems to finally focus on me. "You jumped with me?"

I'm in front of him now, treading water and trying not to shiver. "Yeah."

"Fuck. Okay."

I'm realizing now that I didn't need to follow him. Which is awesome. I soaked through my clothes and embarrassed myself, and probably made an ass of the both of us—but more so me. Fantastic. And awkward as hell. Way to go, Harris. Way to fucking go.

"I'm going back to the shore," I say and begin slicing through the water freestyle, back to the already disinterested crowd gathered there.

"Wait, wait." Sebastian catches up with me. He's taller than I am, like an overgrown willow tree. "Thanks for following. I ... wouldn't have expected anyone here to do that."

"Don't mention it." Then I submerge my head completely underwater and make my way slowly toward the gravel-laden bank.

I'm picking myself up out of the water, perked up by the sudden all-encompassing cold, when someone tosses a towel over my shoulder. I don't know why I expected to see Liam, but I'm surprised when I see Saanvi there, holding another towel. Before I can ask her where she got this and why she has so many towels, she says, "Thanks, McCammon."

I wrap the towel around my shoulders, teeth chattering. "No problem, Gaddam."

She gives me a slight smile—something far more vulnerable from her than I'm used to. Saanvi and I don't hate each other, but she and Liam do, and I'm pretty Liam-aligned socially. We're those people that are practically joined at the hip, for better or for worse, just like Saanvi and Sebastian.

"Really," she says. She's never smiled at me before. Or spoken to me, for that matter. "I mean it."

Sebastian sloshes out of the water behind me, and Saanvi is on him in seconds, rubbing his hair with the towel and chewing him out. "You're so fucking stupid. Why the fuck would you do that? I want to murder you. I am going to murder you. Actual. Murder." With

how he towers over her, it's kind of like Bilbo reaming out Gandalf.

I glance around. Liam is gone, nowhere to be seen.

"Well," I say, "this has been fun, but I need to go home."

"You aren't driving, are you?" Saanvi asks.

I wave her off. "I'll be fine. I only had a couple drinks. And that water was cold as fuck."

"Yeah, you had a couple more-than-shots of tequila. The fuck, Harris."

With the towel draped over my shoulders, my hands are free to zhuzh up my hair. It's all wet and stringy right now, and I'm sure that it looks a lot more brunet than blond. It's going to dry all crazy, I know. "I feel like jumping in freezing water sobered me up quite a bit."

Saanvi looks up at Sebastian—whom she is still drying off—with this *can you believe this, HELP ME* face. "Where's Liam? Has he been drinking?"

I shrug. "He's definitely not sober, but I don't know where he is." I was planning on catching a ride anyways. Going home with Liam always winds up in stupid drunk shit, the kind I have absolutely zero patience for after jumping into a stupid freaking lake.

She tosses the towel at Sebastian, who accepts it without second thought and keeps on wiping himself down. "I'll take you home. Sebastian and I should get going, anyway."

I want to argue with her, but the cold has seeped into my bones. With the slight breeze currently going, I feel like I might freeze to death. Behind Sebastian, students begin cheering and jumping into the freezing water, each in varying states of undress.

Before I can tell Saanvi to mind her own *Gaddam* business, Sebastian cuts me off. "He lives closer to me. I'll take him."

"What, so *he* can drive, but I can't?"

"I'm sober," Sebastian says.

"You just jumped off a cliff," I point out.

"Doesn't mean I'm incapable of driving."

"I feel like an incapable person might jump off cliffs. Just maybe."

Sebastian turns to his best friend, sculpted eyebrows raised. "Saanvi?"

Saanvi bites her lip. "I mean ... are you sure you're okay to drive yourself, Seb?"

"Yeah," he says calmly.

"Are you *sure*?"

"Yeah, it'll be okay. I'm good."

She sighs. "Fine, you can take him. But you need to text me when you get home safe. And take a warm shower please. And get a good night's sleep."

"I will, I promise," Sebastian says, leaning down and hugging Saanvi. Being at well over a foot shorter than him, Saanvi reaches up on tip-toe and hugs him back.

Cold Cold Man by Saint Motel starts blasting, and Saanvi reaches into her back jeans pocket for her phone. "Fuck, it's my mom," she says. "I really gotta get going."

She answers the phone and says something in a language I don't recognize. Sebastian waves as Saanvi speed walks away from us, nearly stumbling over gravel while she speaks rapid-fire not-English.

I turn to Sebastian. He's staring down at me with those hauntingly piercing brown eyes. Have they always been so light? Or is it a mix of the fading light and the lingering madness from his little jump?

"Are you sure you're okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine. Really."

"Why'd you jump, dude?" No one is paying any attention to us, somehow. They're all too busy trying to play chicken in the lake. With all the plants and algae on the lake floor, though, they're having some difficulty. Everyone is either slipping and landing face-first in the water, or they're screeching from the cold. I can only imagine the frigid squelching between their toes. I hate Lake Franz with a passion, honestly.

Sebastian looks out at the lake. He has one of those jaws that's so pointed that it's just a straight line that curves ever so slightly at the end, with cheekbones so sharp that it's almost as if he had buccal fat removal.

"I don't know," he says, and I realize I'm staring at the mole that's right below where his jaw hinges. He really is nice to look at, in a high-fashion, alien kind of way. "I just felt like it."

I wait for him to say something else. He doesn't offer me anything more.

"If you really are giving me a ride, let's just get going," I say, chucking my towel at him.

"What about your car?"

I wave him off. "It's Liam's. He'll find a ride."

"You're sure?"

"He's Liam."

"Yeah, okay."

I follow Sebastian out toward the treeline, which obscures most of the gravel parking lot. He heads right toward the giant Dodge truck, parked right next to the fish fileting/descaling hut. It smells like fish and algae. I hate this lake.

Sebastian tosses our towels into the uncovered truck bed. "Hold up," I say. "This is yours?"

"I like trucks," Sebastian says, in a way that would be gruff if he weren't so pretty.

"Huh. You struck me as more of a Subaru guy."

He looks at me, and it's as if my blood chills in my veins. That look. That face. What planet is he from? "Not all gay Midwesterners drive Subarus." And he walks around to the driver's side, hopping inside with habitual ease.

I stand there, then jerk open the passenger door. I don't get in, just cock my head and say, "You're gay?"

"Uhhhh," he says, "yeah? We kissed once, dude."

Well.

I most definitely do not remember that.

A/N - hi my name is olivia and i guess i am a masochist!!!

okay buh-bye now!!!!!!!!!!

[image]

chapter two

[image]

Sebastian

Harrisons' hair is still wet from the lake, slicked back as if he meant to show off his strong, squarish face. His cheeks are flushed a blotchy crimson, although I'm pretty sure it's due to the cold, and not the shots of tequila I saw him downing with Liam Grande earlier. The light of the filet shack behind us casts a warm golden light on him, one that catches the droplets of water on his temples and makes his skin glow.

Y'know, he really is a punchable bastard.

"Not all Midwestern gays drive Subarus," I tell him, because it should be obvious. How sad is it that I'm allowing myself to feel emasculated by Harrison McCammon, of all people. I hop into the truck, trying not to get too pissed off. I'm too tired to deal with his petty, microaggressive bullshit today.

I'm not even buckled in when Harris rips open the passenger door and gives me a wide-eyed stare, tilting his head as if he's confused about something. Meanwhile, all I'm thinking of is the feeling of his hands firm against my chest, head tilted up as our lips pressed together, him murmuring my own name against my mouth.

Which, whatever. Whatever. He never talked to me again after that. So, screw Harrison McCammon, and his stupid parted lips. Fucking mouthbreather.

But then he asks, "You're gay?"

And all I want to ask back is, *How fucking drunk were you?* But I don't. I just say, "Uhhhh, yeah? We kissed once, dude."

His face crumples. Somehow, his eyes get even wider.

So, um, he most definitely does not remember that.

The back of my neck heats up. "Do you ... do you not remember that?"

"Fuck no," Harris says, shaking his head. He lifts himself into the truck and sits in the passenger seat, staring forward a few moments before looking over at me. "When was that?"

"Elana Doorsey's New Years party," I tell him. Everyone was there, even me and Saanvi. It was right after Evan and I broke up, and it was where everyone said Liam temporarily dumped Harris for the umpteenth time. I figured I was a rebound kind of situation for him, and that's why I was so easily ignored the Monday after the party. Harris never even tried to speak to me after that—not that he ever had before, of course.

"Oh." He winces. "I don't remember any of that."

I blink. "Not any of it?"

"No. That whole night is ... well. A blur, pretty much. I didn't even realize you were gay."

I shrug, even though it stings more than I'd like it to. If Harris doesn't remember our kiss, then there's no way I could possibly expect him to recall my own queerness. I'm content in the closet—that's why Evan and I broke up, after all. Because, even if I loved him, the idea of coming out to my parents, who aren't the nice kind of Methodist, was far from appealing. And that was a no-go for Evan. I don't understand how or why it stings, the fact that Harris doesn't know. I don't know, maybe it would have been nice to have someone aside Saanvi and Evan be in the know. Someone who gets it who's not my ex.

I start the engine and peel out of the parking space, tires fighting to maintain a strong hold on the loose gravel. Harris stares out the front dash the whole time. I want to tell him it's okay, he's allowed to make eye contact with me. I won't verbally eat his face off, not like Saanvi would. I'm by and large apathetic to most people. I don't think it's misanthropy, I think it's laziness. In this case, I'd feel quite

comfortable declaring it the latter. The garden of fucks I give about Harrison is completely devoid of any and all signs of fuck-giving life.

I'm playing Mountain Goats on the radio, from off one of the CDs that Saanvi and I burnt together when we were thirteen and thought we were the only people in the world who listened to this music, our music, even though we only found it because it was in a John Green movie. I'm having a suitably enjoyable time ignoring Harrison and his marble-chiseled cheekbones until he breaks the comfortable silence.

"I'm really sorry," he says.

I glance over at him. His hair has begun to dry, and a few stringy strands of hair in the front are curling erratically in front of his face. He stares straight ahead, right out at the truck headlights illuminating the pitch black stretch of road before us. I look back too. Everything stops shaking as we finally get off the gravel portion, transitioning to smooth blacktop. Newly painted dashes in the middle of the road are garishly bright.

"It's fine," I tell him. And it is. "I don't care." Because I don't.

"You sure?" he asks.

"I'm sure."

"Because ... you don't *sound* sure."

My hands tighten on the steering wheel, knuckles going white against the black leather. I fight the urge to turn to him. "What do you mean, I don't 'sound' sure?"

I see him shrug in my periphery. "Whatever. You just don't."

"Okay, and? I don't—"

A small grey form darts out onto the road. Instinct kicks in. Everything feels as if it goes by in slow motion. I hear Harris yelp as I slam on the breaks. I block my face with my arms right before I'm thrown into the steering wheel. The car screeches to a halt. Harris'

head hits the dashboard.

Everything is silent, the only sound being the Mountain Goats on the radio, and my own heavy breathing.

I'm too scared to look over at Harris. I can't believe my airbags didn't deploy. If something happened to him, I don't—

"Jeeeesus fucking Christ," he groans, still slumped up on the dash. "Fuuuucking hell."

He tries to sit back, his hand immediately going to his temple, where I can see a shining trail of blood already trickling down over his brow.

Oh my god, my parents are going to murder me.

"Let me see that." I toss the car in park and lean over the center console to try and examine where he must have banged his head.

Harrison's eyes focus on me. At least he doesn't *seem* out of it. But then he asks, "Is the rabbit okay?" and I'm suddenly a little less sure.

"Fuck the rabbit, are *you* okay?"

He waves me off with his free hand. "I'm all good, don't worry."

"Let me see your head, Harris."

"Jesus, it's just a little cut." He moves his hand, and to his credit, no waterfall of blood comes gushing out. At least that I can tell in the darkness. "Head wounds bleed more. I'm seriously good."

I'm still not entirely convinced, but whatever. Not my head. Kind of my problem, but not my head. I lean over and open the glove box—all too aware of Harrison's knees, torso, face, right there next to me if I look up—and pull out some Culver's napkins. "Here. There are more in there if you want any."

I press them into his palm, and although I can only see his face in the outline of the car stereo light, I just know he's looking right at me. I feel the warmth of his fingers through the napkins in his palm.

The tips of his fingers find my own. A shiver shoots up my spine.

"Thank you," he murmurs, but doesn't move his hand.

My breath is completely caught in my throat. "Should I turn on the light so we can take a better look at it?"

"No, this is—this is okay. Thank you."

I don't sit back up. I'm frozen, somehow. I'm waiting for Harris to tell me what to do. To tell me to sit back up, to tell me to drive. To tell me to take him home and never speak to him again. But then I see him there, the outline of him leaning in towards me. The scent of cheap tequila and coppery blood is a strange mix, especially with the overpowering lake water smell trapped to both of us, but I'm not focusing on that. I'm focusing on the warmth of his breath as I feel him exhale against my Cupid's bow, how one of his hands miraculously finds the underside of my jaw in the darkness. He tilts my chin towards his, and I have a flash of deja vu.

But it's different this time. Last time, our kissing was just sloppy fumbling around in the dark, taking cheeky shots to rile each other up. I had thought that there were sparks before, but now I know how wrong I was, because when Harris' lips meet my own, I know: this is what sparks feel like.

Harris' mouth is small, almost doll-like, and something about the way he kisses me with that mouth of his feels so sweet that I'm about to combust right here in my seat. My hands stay on my lap, because I don't know what on earth I'm meant to be doing with them, but I can feel a strange tingling in my fingers as goosebumps raise along my arms.

His hand tightens in my hair, a fist knotted behind my head pushing me, pulling me into him. I'm loving it, but I still have to force myself back to catch my breath.

"Sorry," he says, similarly breathless.

"Don't be." I inhale deep.

And then he laughs, almost incredulously. I look away, out the front

windscreen onto the road. The harsh yellow of my brights turns the gravel a sepia-toned golden. Ahead of us, I spot a raccoon disappearing into the high grass of the ditch next to the road. Mosquitoes and moths flit around the headlights, a reminder that a groggy, humid summer lies ahead of us.

"Sorry," he says again, "I just—I didn't expect that. That was ... that was really good."

"It was?" No one's ever told me a kiss was good before, let alone 'really' good. Fuck, why did I jump off a cliff's edge to try and 'live a little' when I could have been kissing Harrison McCammon all along?

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah. Fuck. Yeah. Okay."

"Well, thank you."

I can hear him finally seem to catch his breath. "No, thank you. We should, um. We should do that again sometime. If you'd like."

I hear my engine thrumming, just under the radio. A grasshopper sounds off outside near the truck. I didn't picture tonight winding up like this, soaking wet hair and kissing Harrison McCammon in my truck. But if the nerve-wracking tension in my stomach and chest is telling me anything, it's that this boy is doing things to me that no one has ever done before. It's almost scary, but I want to kiss him again. No, I *need* to kiss him again.

I don't say anything. I just reach across the center console and tug him into me.

a/n - i feel like i usually write slow burn so i have NO IDEA if this is good but like ... ayyyyyyy

[image]

second semester of uni is wrapping up for me! new thing from me: i have a job as a concert promoter now (my boss said it's basically just babysitting bands; we do concerts with bands like the rare occasions and daisy the great, and i'm so hyped)

hope you guys are all doing well! i'm hoping to update again before the ONC deadline tomorrow, lol. we'll see how that goes

anyways, enjoy, and as always, if you have feedback or suggestions or just any thoughts at all, please don't hesitate to let me know!!

chapter three

[image]

Harris

Sebastian feels fragile in my hands somehow. Like if I squeeze him too hard, he'll snap in half. I internally flinch at the thought of pulling him in too close. But, at the same time, it's impossible to not want to. I don't think I've ever wanted to feel someone up against me as closely as I do Sebastian right now.

His hands are pressed up against my chest, his mouth against mine. We keep having to pull apart to catch our breath, and honestly, the waiting to feel his lips on mine again is torture, even if it's only a few seconds. His hair is still damp from the lake. We haven't been out here on the road for long, although it's felt like ages. I know we're going to need to get out of here soon; it's not as if we can stay haphazardly parked in the middle of the gravel road, fogging up the truck windows.

Even though I wouldn't mind fogging up the truck windows with him.

Sebastian pushes lightly at my chest and says, "I think we need to get going."

And, fuck, I know he's right, but I don't want him to be. "Mm, do we *have* to?"

"Yes." I think I hear a slight smile in his tone, but I'm not sure. "You should go clean up that cut on your forehead."

Now that he's mentioned it, I can feel the throbbing in my temple once more. I'd blocked it out completely—let's be honest, I had a pretty terrific distraction—but I probably should go clean it up, stick some honey and a bandaid on it or something. I don't think it will warrant any stitches, which is good, because I'm used to stitches by now, but I still hate them.

"Fine. But ... if you're down, maybe you could come help me clean it up?"

He hesitates, staying silent for a few moments while he mulls it over, so I add, "I'm stupid. We know this. I could potentially accidentally maim myself further. And then you might feel bad."

"Would I *really* feel bad?"

"Yes. I'm deciding for you right now, yes."

He goes quiet again, and I wait for him to decide. My head stopped bleeding on its own. I think he knows that, if we go back to my house, there will be more making out. And, if he'd like, maybe more. Because I know I for one would definitely be down to do more. But I want him to choose that. The last thing I want to be is pushy.

"Yeah," Sebastian whispers.

"Yeah?"

He doesn't sound sure. I'm about to tell him that he seriously doesn't have to if he doesn't want to when he says, "Yes. Yeah. Are ... are your parents home?"

"Nope. My mom is at work."

"And your dad?"

Pretty sure he only asked about my dad to be polite, unless he really does live under a rock. "Uhhh, I don't really have one. So we're all good on that front." I still want to make sure that he's okay with this. With the connotations of coming over to someone's house late at night with no parents after a semi-intense makeout sesh. "If you'd rather come over some time when she is home, you—"

"Nope. I just figured that maybe we'd be doing some things that you ... well, you wouldn't want your mom to overhear."

I smile. Not just smile, more grin, really. "You're kinda cute, Sebastian Krause."

"Gross. Just call me Seb. Sebastian makes me feel like a crab."

I pick up his hand closest to me, resting on the center console, and press a small kiss against his knuckle. I'm surprised by how easy he is to banter with. "You'd be a cute crab, too."

He jerks his hand away and runs a hand through his hair. I'm sure his face is bright red right now, which, yeah, that's pretty satisfying. "Shut up," he mutters. "Let's just go."

I laugh as he restarts the engine and pulls off down the road into the night.

—

"This is it," I tell him, pointing to the small two story house with its peeling grey paint and the dingy yellow porch light that turns the cracked sidewalk a goldenish pewter. It's not that our house is beat up or run down or anything, it's just old. All the houses in this area of town are, but I kinda like it. They have this rustic charm about them that I've always appreciated.

Sebastian pulls up along the steep curb and kills the engine. Now, all I can hear are chirping grasshoppers and the rustling of leaves in the slight summer breeze. "I *knew* this was your house."

"You knew?"

"Well," he says, taking his keys out of the ignition and turning off the headlights, "you do cross country and track and stuff. You expect me not to notice when you're always running around shirtless and toned and sweaty? I've noticed you going inside."

"Wow, were you stalking me?"

"Not intentionally? But, you're hot. It was hard not to pay attention. I'm not sorry."

I smile at him, even though I know he can't see it, and open the passenger door. "Y'know, I think that's the most confident I've ever heard you sound before."

He trails behind me up the sidewalk, pausing before the porch steps to look left and right, as if he expects someone to be watching us. A mosquito lands on the soft, exposed skin of his neck, and he smacks it without a second thought. "Shut up, McCammon."

"Make me."

"You are incorrigible."

"I don't know the meaning of the word." For a second, I worry he won't get the reference and will just assume I'm an idiot. Sebastian is the one who has some big scholarship to an out-of-state school, unlike me, who only got a scholarship to Mankato because of cross country. That's probably the thing that Sebastian is known for, is being one of the smartest people around. Him, and Saanvi, who's Princeton-bound. But I'm not stupid. My mom and I used to read together every night. I do, in fact, know what "incorrigible" means.

But then Seb says, "Scott Pilgrim?" And I'm pretty sure I just beam at him.

I'm standing on the porch steps, and with the extra half a foot, I've still only got about an inch on Sebastian. His features are more angular in this lighting, his cheeks a little sunken, a little sallow. There are bags beneath his eyes that I've never noticed before, but they match the disheveled look of his hair. He's probably the only person on the planet who looks like they just rolled out of bed after not sleeping a wink, and legitimately manages to make it look good.

He's not looking at me. Instead, he's staring off down the street. I always forget the warmth of the summer nights here, a heavy kind of humidity that is a complete contrast to the snow that was still melting just a month ago. With the dark night sky that appears to want to swallow the entire block, but can't, not with the faded gold of the street lamps illuminating the asphalt and blades of grass slowly shooting up through the dead lawn left behind by several feet of snow.

"You okay?" I ask. I'm worried that he's changed his mind. And that would be okay. Seriously. I have no idea just what we're doing here. I'm excited, but I'm also not an asshole. I feel bad enough about

forgetting that we kissed. I don't want him to feel rushed or something—because, this really is fast.

His head swivels around, and our eyes meet. He's always had this wild, untamed vibe about him. And that's what I see in his expression now. But I don't think it's fear, so, hopefully that's a good indicator.

"I'm good," he says, not moving.

"Are you sure? We seriously don't have to...." My voice trails off as he takes one step forward, then another. I swallow hard despite myself.

Another step forward, and he's standing right in front of me. His gaze trails up my body, seemingly soaking me in. I'm surprised with how breathless I am, how breathless he's made me.

"Harris," he murmurs, and I suck in a breath. His eyes are so piercing, almost amber in this light. I can't make myself look away. "Aren't you going to invite me inside?"

a/n - no thoughts, brain empty

chapter four

[image]

Sebastian

I don't know just what it is that Harrison and I are doing, but I know one thing is certain: I'm not complaining.

As soon as we're through the door, Harris and I are pressed right up against each other, breathing in each other's air and tugging at the hems of each other's shirts. His grip is strong, firm, and it makes my knees weak. I've never, ever felt anything like this. When Evan and I were together, it felt like we were clumsy beginners, awkwardly fumbling our way through sloppy, off-kilter kisses. It's different with Harris. He makes me *feel* different.

"My bedroom is in the basement," he says breathlessly. "If you wanna—"

I kiss him again, and he leads me off in the general direction of the staircase to the basement, the pair of us stumbling along the whole way. When we finally reach the stairs, he presses me up against the wall and lets out a shudder of a breath against my skin, before beginning to trace soft kisses along the length of my neck.

"Harrison," I whisper, eyes squinted shut. "Can we please go downstairs?"

"Mmhmm," he hums, right beneath my jawline. "Yeah, yeah, sure."

He takes my hand. I'm surprised at the smoothness of his palms. Between the two of us, I'd have assumed Harrison would be the one to have rough hands. The softness catches me off guard, but it also somehow excites me further.

"Let's go," he says, tugging me. The staircase is steep, but somehow, I feel as if I'm floating. "Gotta show you where the magic happens."

"Dude, gross."

His fingers are shorter than mine, a little stubbier. His grip is tight, and I'm not entirely convinced any of this is actually happening. Surely, this must be a dream, because no way am I headed down to Harrison McCammon's basement to do who-knows-what with him.

We get to the bottom step, and I take in the mess of clothes strewn about the concrete floor; the dark blue shag carpet that looks like it's been in this basement since the late 70s; the unmade full-sized bed with maroon bedding and a dark grey blanket. "You're really sure—" he starts again, and I just kiss him.

We manage—somehow—to make it to the bed, with our limbs flailing about us. Before I can process anything, my hands are up his shirt, he's cupping my face, the soft touch of his fingertips tickling my skin, and we're on the mattress, just the two of us. He's gone back to tracing those kisses along my neck, and I'm somewhat in awe of how tender he is. That drunk kiss we had shared at Elana Doorsey's New Year's party was so different. It was sloppy and hot and slimy, so different from the soft, feather-light kisses Harris presses against my exposed neck now.

"Do you want me to—" he starts, and my stomach does a backflip.

"Wait, wait." I prop myself up on my elbows and take him in. His hair is a complete mess, its usual floppy bedheadness dried in a mess after the lake. His clothes are still damp, and I find that where his T-shirt is touching my forearm is suddenly cold. What *are* we doing?

"Are you okay?" he asks. "We can stop if you want."

I bite the inside of my cheek and take a steady breath. "I ... this is just really fast. And don't you have a thing with Liam?"

"No," he says immediately. "Not anymore."

I want to ask him since when was that a thing, but it feels like the kind of question you just don't bring up in conversation. It's not any of my business. If Harris and Liam are broken up, or if they're just

friends with benefits, or what—none of it should matter to me. Even though the thought of him with Liam makes me feel ... weird. Not jealous, per se, but yeah. Weird.

"Do you not want to do anything?" Harris says.

Fuck. If I say no, he'll send me home, and this'll be the most embarrassing moment ever, wherein I gave up the opportunity to—

"Because we really don't have to." His voice is so soft. "It's okay if you don't want to. We can take it slow, or we can even, like, do nothing. That's okay too. I just want you to be comfortable, Sebastian."

The basement air is frigid, but the blanket we're laying on seems to have soaked up our body heat. Still, there are goosebumps raised along my arms. "Then ... could we just make out?"

When Harris grins, his eyes seem to light up. Little crow feet crinkle up, smile lines crease. "Sounds good to me."

—

I'm pretty sure a few hours have passed before the two of us tire out. Part of me wants more, but the other part knows that that would probably be a little irresponsible. Well, a little ranging to a lot.

Harrison's head is on my chest, his eyes shut. I don't know if he's asleep. I hope he's not, because I should probably get going soon, but I'm enjoying this little moment. His eyelashes are short and straight, just a few shades darker than the faint brushing of freckles along his cheeks and forehead. His head moves up and down with every rise and fall of my chest. I'm laying back on his bed, arms crossed behind my head, simply observing him.

He's cute. I've always thought that. I think it's hard not to. Even if Harris isn't your type, you can't say he's not cute. He's conventionally attractive in a teen movie star kind of way, with little physical quirks like his messy hair or the small scar on his temple, on the opposite side of the dashboard scratch from tonight.

But I think, for me, what always made him appealing is the weird happiness he has about him. You can't see it when he's with Liam—which, granted, has become more and more of the time—but when the pair of them are apart, Harris has this grounded yet infectious joy about him. It's nice to see him smile.

"You're pretty good with your mouth," he says, eyes still shut. Guess he's not asleep then.

"You're not too shabby either."

"Who even says 'shabby' anymore?" He adjusts his head and smiles at me. "It's okay, though. I forgive you."

"Pfft." I pat the top of his head; his hair is unbelievably soft, and it makes me want to tangle my fingers in it all over again. "Shut up, Harris."

"Well *that's* not a very quippy comeback."

"I'm tired."

"You're slipping."

I sigh. "Shut up."

He just hums and snuggles into me a little more. Harris always gave sleepy boy energy, but I'd never imagined him to be a cuddly boy. I'm not going to say anything, though. I like cuddling. Cuddling is good.

"Hey, Harrison?"

"Hey, Sebastian?"

I thread my fingers lightly through his hair, eyes focused on the exposed pipe in the basement ceiling. "What are we doing here? Like, what is this?"

"I ... I really don't know."

I was expecting that. It's not like I know what we're doing here

either. "Well, what do you want it to be?" *If anything*, I want to add, but don't.

"Uhhhh...." I can tell he doesn't want to answer. And again, it's not like I know either. I'm pretty sure I'm just going to echo any sentiment he shares, because I'll take anything at this point.

But instead of making my life easier, Harris asks, "What do you want it to be?"

I'm quiet for a moment, trying to figure out what he wants me to say. Knowing Harris—not really *knowing*, which is a problem; it's more so knowing *of* Harris—he wouldn't be looking for a serious relationship, right? He and Liam seem to have been going casually on and off for a couple years now. He seems comfortable with something non-committal, from what I know. Even in school, he was always trying to find ways to be as not-involved as possible. So....

"Maybe we keep this casual?" I ask. I know we're alone, but I still ask quietly.

When he looks up at me, I can't read his expression. But then he smiles, and he says, "I can do that."

I smile back. "Perfect." I guess I was right. Harrison McCammon doesn't do serious.

A/N - I'm so sorry that there was an issue with chapters 4 and 5 getting uploaded the first time!! Hopefully you guys are enjoying this thus far.

chapter five

[image]

Harris

Sebastian leaves after about another half an hour, leaving me all by my lonesome to do nothing but contemplate what has gone down. There's just a couple hours till sun-up, and my hand is resting over the fresh hickey left a couple inches below the collar of my T-shirt. I never would have guessed that he would have been capable of such feats, but in all honesty, I've never felt anything like that before.

It leaves a certain sort of pang in my chest, though, because it brings me back to those first few times of hooking up with Liam. We've been fooling around since we were fifteen and sixteen respectively, although we only started *really* dating when we were headed into our junior year. We lasted off and on again for about seven months, and I guess we'd been playing it as casual friends with benefits since then.

Because, with Liam, the magic wore off quickly. Being with him had been intoxicating at first; being with him was like an addiction I couldn't imagine shaking—and believe me, I did try. Even now, he has this weird kind of pull on me, this allure that I can't ignore. And I love spending time with Liam, I do. But what we had was just boring, and repetitive, and I wasn't really into it, especially when he started getting wasted and trying to push me farther than I appreciated. We're better off as just friends, sans benefits.

I was kind of hoping that Seb would have wanted to try out dating for real, but I get it. We barely know each other, no matter how intense our chemistry may feel. He's nicer than I'd anticipated, especially for someone who's close with Saanvi Gaddam. Not that she's a bad person or anything, I just figured she wouldn't be friends with someone fun. And on top of that, Sebastian is unbelievably quiet. We've grown up together, a block or so apart, and yet we'd never really spoken until tonight. It's alright though, his wanting to be just casual. Call it a situationship, call it friends with benefits,

call it whatever you want—I've done that with Liam before. So I know how to manage my expectations, thankfully.

I roll over onto my side and reach for my white water thermos. I'm always thirsty as hell after a night of drinking. I'm usually really hungry too, but I'm too cozy to even think about getting up right now. Earlier, laying with my head on Seb's chest like that, his heartbeat quietly thudding in my ear, I felt surprisingly calm, and not that floaty kind of numbness I feel after drinking. Legitimately content. It was nice.

I can't believe I just had the most intense make out session with Sebastian Krause.

I think it's a small town thing, calling people by their first and last name. Because, if your town is the kind of small that West Denton is, people might not know who you're talking about, but they might just recognize their last name. For Sebastian's parents, I don't know too much about them, only that Sebastian's dad is an anti-vaxxer dentist, and his very quiet mom teaches kindergarten. No siblings, at least that I know of. And he lives so close by—it's surprising we've never spent time together before.

My phone is dead, and I finally muster the strength to go half off the bed to grab the end of the charger. We must have flung it off during the whole making out thing, which, oh well.

The second my phone turns on, its screen glaringly bright in the darkness, I see the few missed text notifications from Liam come in. I'm almost upset that it's only two, but whatever. He knows I can handle myself, I guess.

Liam: hey srry to ditch u but eli wakeman is taking me home

Liam: see u tmrw

I want to ask him since when have we had plans for tomorrow, but we were probably going to hang out tomorrow anyway. The apparent lack of concern he has for my well-being is a little upsetting though. Just, whatever. Whatever. I don't really care.

There's another notification that comes in, one I wasn't expecting. A notif from Instagram: *@saanvigaddaaaam has requested to follow you.*

I accept her request and send one back, then notice the message in my inbox from a couple hours ago.

saanvigaddaaaam: Thanks again for helping Sebastian earlier

saanvigaddaaaam: Hope y'all got home safe

Yeah, okay, it kinda stings that even Saanvi seems to give more of a shit than Liam does, but it's okay. I don't really care.

Upstairs, I hear the front door open and shut as quietly as possible. Usually, I don't hear my mom come back from work. She was behind in getting her MD—unplanned, undetected pregnancies will do that to you—so she's doing her residency right now. Generally speaking, at these times I'm either asleep, at Liam's doing God knows what, or a combination of both. I hear her footsteps creak with every step on the floor above me, all the way through the living room and kitchen to the door to the basement steps.

I don't think Seb closed it when he showed himself out, which is probably why I hear her footsteps quietly heading down the steps. I feel like a little kid doing it, but I pull my comforters up and shut my eyes, pressing my face down into my pillow.

The trick with pretending to be asleep is that sleeping people actually breathe at a pretty normal pace. That whole long, deep breaths thing—that doesn't work. So I just breathe as normally as I possibly can.

I can feel Mom's presence looming over me, probably just checking to see that I'm there. She hardly ever comes down here, at least as far as I'm aware. I'm glad that she doesn't reach out to touch me or anything weird, like how movie moms do that whole pushing back their kids' hair on their foreheads and shit. Like, if she did that, or even if she were to tug the blanket up farther or something, I would probably jump out of my skin and ruin the whole shtick.

She doesn't do anything though. Just sees that I'm there and that I'm probably asleep, and heads back to the stairs. I don't move until I hear the door to the basement shut and her footsteps creak all the way along to the bathroom.

I turn my phone back on and look up his name on Instagram: Sebastian Krause.

Surprisingly, his account is public, with over four hundred followers. He doesn't have many pictures up, just a few of him and Saanvi from proms and formals, and a few others of random spirit days throughout the years. He's tagged in a lot of photos, though, including one I hadn't seen before, from the Dartmouth 2026 page.

I honestly didn't know he was headed there for college, but the pictures he has up are cute. I never thought about it before, how attractive he is, only that he looks fascinating. But these pictures, with his sweet little smile and how he never looks at the camera—always away, usually laughing at Saanvi—are adorable. And there are a few of him in well-fitted suits which are ... yeah. Those are doing something for me.

I must have a thing for tall, slim guys, because Liam is exactly the same way, built like a leggy stick. But where Liam has shaggy blond hair and a nose that's been broken so many times, he almost kind of looks like Owen Wilson, Sebastian is pale and freckled and gives off unparalleled sick Victorian boy energy, which is disturbingly attractive to me. Like a mysterious and hot adult version of the cousin in *The Secret Garden* or some shit. Now I'm kicking myself for letting my mom make me watch that so much as a kid.

The mere thought of planting those kisses against his neck, how his eyes fluttered shut and his chin tilted back, makes me flush.

I'm scrolling through the multitude of tagged photos on his profile when my phone starts buzzing and an unfamiliar number flashes across my screen. The area code is local, which I don't necessarily trust, but I answer anyway, because if it's who I want it to be, then I'd be stupid not to.

Sure enough, it's his faint, low voice on the other end of the line.

I'm not even going to ask how he got this number. "Hey," Sebastian says, "you doing anything tomorrow?"

A/N - what are you guys thinking of this so far? 👀 It's kind of edgier than my typical fluff (saying "edgier" makes my brain want to puke why does that feel weird y'know what it's midnight), and I don't tend to write mlm because wlw is my own experience, but like, I don't know, this story has kinda been in my head for a while sooooo.... yes

Btw do you guys ever feel like you've been body snatched and you don't know it??? Because I've been like, kind of productive in a weird way this week but also not and I'm not sure what I did to be becoming this person but ALSO, still can't clean my dorm so

okay bye

chapter six

[image]

Sebastian

In a span of less than twenty-four hours, I have now had Harris in the passenger seat of my truck not once, but twice. It might not seem like a lot to some people, but for me, spending this much time with a virtual stranger—not to mention doing the kinds of things that we did the night prior—is crazy.

The parking lot of Paco's Shake Shack is large, designed to be shared with a Culver's and a Taco John's. There's a noticeable kind of crowd for each food joint, being: Taco John's attracts a lot of probably-stoned teens who want greasy, salty food quick; Culver's brings in a lot of families who prefer a drive-thru over having to get their young kids out of the SUV, and old people who appreciate the lack of young families and probably-stoned teens; and Paco's picks up a mix of the refuse, a drive-thru-less hang out for teens and slightly older families who like simplistic shakes and a staggering three burger options.

Because of the lack of drive-thru, most of the cars parked in the lot are Paco's customers. Which makes it very easy to gauge just how busy it is. Today is pretty middle of the road, with cars jammed in together on one side of the lot, and the rest of it wide open.

It's a nice seventy degrees. For me, that's about the lowest temp I'll take for acceptable shake weather (because, there really are some temperatures that make shakes better). It's just enough for the backs of my thighs to stick just slightly to the black leather seats. I glance over at Harris in the passenger seat next to me. He's too busy squinting at something on his phone screen, but we're dressed in similar khaki shorts, although his leg hairs seem to catch the sunlight, almost glowing white where the light hits his skin. Don't know why that's what I'm paying attention to, but ... well. Nice legs.

The sun beats down on my arms and the back of my neck as soon as

Harris and I step out of the truck. It makes the walk of only halfway across the parking lot to Paco's front entrance feel like an eternity. He's been quiet—we both have. He'd hopped in my truck this morning, still in the middle of putting one sneaker on as he ran out the door, a band-aid plastered on the side of his temple in the most dipshitty way possible, and flung the passenger side door open with a grin.

"So," he'd asked, that mischievous glint in his eye, "what do you have planned?"

And all I'm doing is bringing him to Paco's Shake Shack. Which is pretty underwhelming, now that I think about it. And, believe me, I *am* thinking about it. I feel like an absolute idiot.

Why did I think that Paco's was a good, cool, hip place to be bringing Harris? For one, knowing what he and Liam get up to, he's much more of a Taco John's guy. And is a malt shop really where you're supposed to bring your ... whatever Harris is to me? I'm hating myself for letting him leave the "hey, what are we?" decision up to me. In theory, I know what "casual" means, but now that we're putting it into practice, I'm completely out of my element. What are our boundaries? What are the rules? Are we going to have to write up some kind of contract, like a fake couple in any rom-com? I did some extensive Googling last night, but everything just all seems so different.

Side note, I didn't sleep a wink last night.

Harris keeps pace next to me, tugging his hair away from his face with one hand. I was surprised to see he kind of dressed up for this. He's wearing a yellow button-up short-sleeve shirt and khaki shorts, which might not seem like dressing up for most people, but for Harris, it's significant effort. He's solidly a T-shirt and jeans guy. For him, it works. I'm convinced Harris could make any look work. I'm completely in my head about his current outfit choice though. Why dress up today? For me? For this? Why? Why why why?

He's practically bouncing with excitement. "I fucking *love* Paco's," he says. I wasn't expecting him to speak. I nearly jump.

"You do?" I ask. Thank the lord.

"Ohhh yes," he says. "Liam is more of a Taco John's guy"—*knew it*—"so I never really have anyone to go here with, except for my mom, but she's been so busy recently that I just haven't gone."

"Oh, that kinda sucks."

"Yeahhhh. I mean, we go to Culver's with my grandma, so it's chill. Just miss Paco's, that's all."

"Ahh." I nod. "Cool." Which, wow, Seb. Ever the conversationalist, I see.

I hold the first set of doors open for Harris, and he holds the next for me in turn. Inside is about as warm as it was outside, but there's a noticeable relief in no longer having UV rays beat down on the sensitive, too pale skin on the back of my neck. The radio playing over the speakers announces itself as 99.7 KARZ FM, the station from a few towns over that I know my parents love, before launching into a song I vaguely recognize.

"Oh, I love this song," Harris says. "Do you know whose mom this is?"

"No clue." I'm still trying to figure out what song this is.

"Maya Rudolph's mom, Minnie Riperton. Everyone remembers *Lovin' You*, but I like *Les Fleur* better."

I'm somewhat impressed that he knows this. Harris always seemed like the kind of guy who wears the occasional Pink Floyd or Black Sabbath shirt just for shits and giggles. Like, his Purple Rain shirt is a fashion choice, not a fan choice. "I didn't peg you as a music guy."

"I mean, my mom loves oldies hits, so I grew up with it."

"Ah, I gotcha." It's weird to hear him talk about his mother. I know I've seen her around—if she were a guy, she'd probably look just like Harris. Same messy blonde hair, same pointed yet soft nose, same tired, laughing eyes. Although, her eyes are more tired than laughing, a trait unshared by Harris. I remember seeing her at

different school events over the years, how exhausted she looked all the time.

My aunt was in her graduating class and told me that Harris' mom gave birth to Harris right before her last year of her pre-med undergrad. One of those freak pregnancies that goes completely unnoticed. And with Harris' dad out of the picture—no one knows who, because Harris' mom went out of state—she moved back home and worked here. So I can't blame her for how tired she looked all the time when I was a kid. Especially knowing how much of a handful Harris can be now, and likely was as a child.

It's unnerving how easy it is to learn all about someone's family living in a town the size of West Denton. It's a little over twenty-thousand people, so it's not as if it's the smallest town on the face of the earth. But it's small enough to where you only need to talk to one or two people to find out everyone's business.

I have to wonder if people will notice that we're here together, or if we're maybe too tired of gossip, worn out from finally graduating—at least for the time being.

Harris looks over his shoulder at me, grinning wide enough to bring to light one dimple. I wouldn't have expected myself to be floored by a mere dimple, but you know what? I guess I'm easy like that.

a/n - the way i took 2 exams today (still feels like monday, 1:48 am on tuesday is still monday) but ONC deadline is today (tuesday, because it is tuesday)

anyways ENJOY

chapter seven

[image]

Harris

I'm full of jitters as Seb and I walk into Paco's. I'm just in front of him, coming right to the back of a line consisting of a dad with two young kids and an elderly throuple. The seats are all cracked teal vinyl, something that will poke into your backside if you sit just wrong, but they've been the same since I was a kid. I've been coming here as long as I can remember, just me, my mom, and my grandma. I grew up close with the two of them, with Mom trying for years to get back on track to go to med school. Grandma was too busy to watch me often, but she was always around, helping whenever she could.

The booths are more full than the long tables. On muggy nights, you'd see the opposite, but right now, there are a plethora of hungover teenagers stuck at home with migraines and DIY hangover cures.

There are familiar faces though, like my fifth grade English teacher hiding in the corner, or Evan Miller, one of the guys on my cross country team, sitting with his girlfriend Rachel. His arm is slung casually around her shoulders, holding her against his chest while her lithe runner's frame shakes with laughter.

"Evan!" I shout. He looks up. "Hey!"

"Hey, Harris!" His gaze flits to Seb, back to me, then back over. "Hey, Seb."

Seb shifts his weight from one foot to the other. He gives Evan a quick nod and mumbles something that feels like it could be a hello. Evan's smile screws itself up a little tighter, his brow scrunches up more, and he seems to hesitate a moment before turning his attention back to a still-laughing Rachel.

"You know Evan?" Seb asks when we turn back around to join the line.

"Huh?"

"Evan," he says. "You guys seem, uh, chummy."

If I knew him better, maybe, just maybe, I'd be able to pinpoint that strange look in his eyes, the detached unfeelingness of his gaze that potentially guards something more. But I can't tell. Sebastian is little more to me than a stranger, whether I like it or not.

"We do track stuff together," I tell him. "Rachel too, but she's two years younger than us, so like, I don't know *her* too well, but she seems really nice. I mean, they've been together a while, haven't they? That whole 'on again, off again' thing? Pretty interesting stuff."

"Hm." Seb isn't looking at me, just at the lit up menu up on the wall behind the cash register, and I just know I've said something wrong.

"Not that I think other people's relationships are interesting. Like, I've got my own life, I'm all good on drama." I wince inwardly. Bad phrasing. Bad, bad phrasing. What a way to come across as a red flag, *wow*.

Seb gives me a look from the side, accompanied by one of those turtle smiles people make when they see you taking a video of them and they don't know what else to do.

"Anyways, yeah, we're not close or anything, just figured I'd say hi, because like—"

"You're good," he says, then sighs. One stickish arm raises through the air; he rubs the back of his neck in a way that seems more self-soothing than self-massaging. Already just a few weeks into summer weather, and the back of his neck is already noticeably redder than the rest of him. "I guess he just stresses me out, is all."

I blink. I hadn't expected that, not really. Evan is a pretty quiet guy all things considered. He hangs out with some slightly-douchey guys, but even when they're all together, he's quiet, electing only to

laugh softly at their slightly-douchey jokes. He's a chill dude. The notion that he could even be *found* stressful is interesting, but I'm not about to judge. Seb's experience is his experience, whatever. It has nothing to do with me, after all.

We order separately—a burger and one strawberry shake for me, one chocolate malt for Seb—and turn back to the lobby. The only seats that are open are all ones incredibly close to Evan and Rachel, and with how his sharp shoulders scrunch forward awkwardly, and with his sour expression, I can tell that Seb doesn't want to go sit by them.

Part of me wants to ask him why he doesn't like Evan, but I know full well that it's not any of my business. Like, I might be stupid, but I'm not *that* stupid. So, taking a few steps to the side to see better, I peek outside the doors on the side of the building. Surrounded by small, prickly bushes and cracked cement, the picnic tables are empty, which is better than nothing.

"Once we get our stuff, wanna go sit outside?" I ask him.

"It's kind of hot outside, isn't it?"

I blink, feigning surprise. "Is it? I love this kind of weather."

"Hmph." Seb takes a few steps over to look outside with me, then glances back to Evan and Rachel. Her head is on his chest, and he's looking in the completely opposite direction than us, his gaze fixated on something outside the window. "Are you sure? We can sit inside if you want. I don't mind."

"Okay, Seb." I cross my arms. "I'm gonna share with you some wisdom that my grandma gave me sitting over there in that very booth"—I point to the corner for emphasis; the elderly throuple now seated there notices, but I don't care—"about seven or so years ago. Are you ready?"

"Ummm.... Sure?"

"Alright. Here goes: you *do* have a preference, so don't be a little pussy and not share it."

"Your *grandma* called you a pussy?"

"A little pussy. Yes." I cross my arms. "And, like, bro, I was being one too. Just like you are right now. Do you want to sit out there, or by *eh-eh*?" I not-so-subtly gesture to Evan with my thumb.

"I ... I don't know. I don't really care."

"Nope. I'm the one who doesn't care. I've decided I care a lot less than you do. I don't care at all, not one bit. So fucking choose, Sebastian."

He shifts his weight from foot to foot. His dark blue shirt makes his skin seem even paler than usual, somehow. He looks like he's uncomfortable after leaving his mother's basement for the first time. He makes it look pretty, though.

"You gonna choose?"

"Fine, fine. Let's just go outside. Once everything's out."

"Cool." I smile. "How hard was that?"

He just shakes his head. "Can't *believe* your grandma called you a 'little pussy.'"

"You should have heard what your mom was calling me last night. Bajillion times worse."

Finally, he laughs, and I try to savor the sound to recall later, before joining in with him.

A/N -

BOYS OF WEST DENTON is an Ambassador's Pick for Round 2 of the OpenNovellaContest which is so freaking cool and I'm very very very very happy. That's all I have right now, lol. Nuff said.

Thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed!!

chapter eight

Sebastian

I hate seeing Evan and Rachel together, but normally, it doesn't really get to me. Maybe it's because I'm usually with Saanvi (who's the queen of distracting me when I get in my own head), or because I only ever see them in passing at school, but seeing their PDA in the booth was a bit much. I mean, she was feeding him fries while Harris was ordering. Does that not seem like a little bit much to anyone else?

It was sweet of Harris to suggest sitting outside, I will say. It was obvious he thought I might be too uncomfy around Evan. He was right about that. I wouldn't have anticipated his being perceptive like that, but I also don't suppose I tried too hard to hide it.

We're sitting out on the black picnic table at the side entrance to Paco's. There's no one here right now, but the table and benches are covered in drops of ice cream and french fry salt. I'm just grateful to be alone with Harris right now.

It was honestly jarring, walking in and seeing Evan there. Why, today of all days, is he getting to me like this?

But seeing him with Rachel ... it always stings, just a little. We broke up after a month-long saga of "I want to tell people we're together, you're my boyfriend" from Evan, who was just as closeted as I was but was willing not to be, and a whole lot of "Evan, my parents do not say yay to gay" from me, who was—and is—very comfortable in the closet. He'd shut down and shut me out not too long before the break up. Which was followed by complete radio silence afterward, because of course it was.

"You not gonna eat that malt?"

I sit up straighter. "Huh? Sorry."

Harris sits on the bench across from me, sitting crisscrossed with his knees pulled up high, amusingly close to his armpits. "You're good. Don't worry about it."

He's using his straw for his shake; I opted for one of Paco's iconic pink spoons. They're a funky fuchsia, one that seems too bright for any of the food they serve, but the shade of pink that they are is admittedly somewhat happiness-inducing.

I take a spoonful of malt. It's mostly runny by this point. I don't care, though. It's more about taste than anything, and with the rich chocolateness flavor with the thickness of the malt powder, I would have a Paco's chocolate malt's babies.

"Are you sure you're good?" Harris asks.

"Yeah. Just ... Evan and I have some history."

"Oh." Harris's eyes widen. "Wait, you guys were together?"

"How did you know that?" My chest tightens. Did I just accidentally out Evan? I thought I was perfectly vague.

Harris swirls his straw around inside the red and white cup. "Because Evan's bisexual, and sometimes when two gay guys in a small town are lonely together very much, they—"

"How did you know?" I repeat.

He gives me a pointed look. "Sometimes, when two gay guys are lonely together very much, they—"

"You and Evan had—"

"No, no, not us, not us." He clears his throat. "Evan and Liam."

I feel myself blink for too long, but it's like I've lost control of my facial expressions. Because, like, okay, huh?

"When?" I ask.

"Ummmm.... Late December, I think? Right before Evan and Rachel

got together."

And now I'm sitting there on the bench, my skin crawling, my body frozen. "You're sure it was December?"

"Yeah." He nods. "That's why me and Liam broke up for the last time. They'd been talking for, like, a month."

"He *cheated* on you?"

Harris just shrugs, evading my eye contact.

"And you're still friends with him?"

"I mean, we were bros before we were hoes, so, yeah. Just decided our friendship was more important."

"Okay like, that's up to you, but I could never forgive someone for that." I glance back inside, where Rachel is finally sitting up on her own, without needing to lean on Evan in order to sit remotely straight. He's still got that arm over her shoulders, though, and from behind, I can see him playing with a strand of stick-straight, light blonde hair, twirling it around and around with his finger.

"He cheated on me," I tell Harris. Because, December? He *must* have. And they were *talking* before that? What the fuck?

"Ope."

Ope? I shrug. "Whatever, that just makes me feel a little better about the whole 'breaking up' thing."

"Do you think he broke up with you to try and date Liam?" Harris asks, and I want to know exactly why he's curious. Is it an innocent question, or does he think that my boyfriend was serious about his? I can see why he'd be worried. I'd be, too.

"Nah," I tell him. "We'd been arguing for a while about my not wanting to come out."

"Ohhhh."

"Yeah."

"That's ... shitty."

"Nah, it's fine." Now it's my turn to shrug helplessly. "I can see how it would be frustrating."

Harris props his chin up on his hands, still seated in his awkward criss-cross on the bench. "How so?"

"Well...." I'm struggling to find the right words. I've thought about this a lot since the breakup, but I've never really had the chance to verbalize it. The only person I've talked to about any of this has been Saanvi, and it's almost like she can read my thoughts half the time. She speaks fluent Seb. This time, I have to choose my words completely. "He still isn't out, obviously, not because he doesn't care about labels but because he doesn't want people to treat him differently."

"He told you this?"

"Yeah."

He nods, reaching out with one hand to push his seemingly empty cup away from him. "Okay, sorry, continue."

"Uh, yeah, so, I don't really have that privilege, I guess. My parents likely wouldn't be super happy with me coming out, especially my dad, and I just don't really feel like making that an issue while I'm at home, living on their dime, y'know? I was seventeen. It was something that could wait for me." My dad's favorite red cap sticks out in the back of my mind. The talks of 'that damn Fauci' and 'all lives.' Mom could possibly tolerate me, but Dad? Never in a million years.

"Of course."

"But Evan decided that we were so in love that he wanted everyone to know about us. And I just couldn't do that. You know how people here talk."

Harris nods. Because, yeah, if I had come out, even to just a few

people outside of Saanvi, everyone would be talking about it. And it's just not any of their business. The thought of people discussing my sexuality behind my back makes me, for whatever reason, vehemently uncomfortable.

"So," I continue, "I told him repeatedly that I wasn't comfortable, but that we could compromise and maybe come out to a few of his friends or something, because I didn't want him to feel like I was hiding him or that he had to hide me. But he, like, didn't want me to tell his friends? Which was weird. Like, he said we couldn't just tell them. I don't know why."

"That's weird," Harris says. His fists dig into his cheeks, pushing him up and making him look a little bit like a chipmunk.

"Totally. So, he broke up with me on Christmas Eve."

Harris gives me a pitying grimace. "That's fucked, bro."

"Tell me about it." I've lost my train of thought; it takes me a moment to remember what I had wanted to say. "Oh, right, but yeah. Guess he was cheating on me too. Which is great."

"That's extra fucked. I'm sorry."

The thing is, it seems like Harris really does mean it. *I'm sorry*. My heart twists for him, just a little bit, because even though he's always come across like a little douche canoe when around Liam, he's actually really sweet. Which just makes me feel even worse for him that Liam cheated on him.

He looks at me, his smile soft and understanding, and I can't even bring myself to imagine what I'd be doing today, if not for being here with him. Without warning, he sits up straight, his smile widening suddenly, and says, "I have a place we could go."

A/N - ehehehehehe what's good, twoooo updates!! <33

chapter nine

[image]

Harris

I was surprised that Seb let me drive his truck. Like, everyone knows I accidentally hit Mason Pedersen's brand new Mustang that one time. Luckily, it was only in the high school parking lot, and Mason wasn't mad after Liam hooked him up with his dealer. Probably the only time Liam came to the rescue—making sure I wasn't pulverized by some massive brute of a football player in the middle of the parking lot. (Mason Pedersen is *massive*. I low-key owe Liam my life now.)

Anyways, Seb's reaction probably would have been different if he knew about all those other cars I've secretly (accidentally) nicked in parking lots, but I would just like to point out that my mom's old car had no steering fluid and an issue with the brakes. So. Is it *really* my fault?

I drive us—without crashing, thank you—to the south side of Denton, the part where paved streets with quaint little houses turn into gravel roads with trailer parks and the occasional farmhouse. Of course Sebastian recognizes where we're headed; after all, we were here together only last night.

"We're going to Lake Franz?" he asks. Even though it's his truck, I guess he didn't think to adjust the seat, for whatever reason. His legs are stuck awkwardly in front of him, knees pressed uncomfortably against the underside of the glovebox.

"Indeedly-doodly." Which isn't entirely a lie. We *are* headed to Lake Franze. It's just our parking spot, though, not our final destination.

"Cool," he says quietly, which would be my response to someone taking me there too. I fucking hate Lake Franz. Bottom ten lake for sure.

Hopefully he enjoys where we end up. Hopefully.

Seb's head is resting against the window. I can't see if his eyes are closed, or if he's watching the golden-brown gravel dust puff up along the sides of the truck. The ditches next to the sides of the road aren't overgrown—for once—but they're flooded with water from a combination of last weekend's storm and the last of the winter's melted snow. Sometimes, the flooding gets so bad that the water from Lake Franz spills out, and you'll end up with fish in the road ditches, even all the way out here.

My mom had a boyfriend who would take me out trying to fish in all the ditches, seeing who could catch what. It was a wild goose chase more often than not, but we'd catch young catfish and the occasional carp every now and again. The ditches are mostly frog spawn, though, regardless of floods. Soon enough, the ditches will dry out, and either the frogs will make their way to Lake Franz, or they'll die here, just like the fish we'd rarely catch.

I used to think that the ditch fish were fascinating when I was a kid, but now I think it's just sad. I went from wondering what it would be like to end up there, to realizing what an awful fate it was. The kind of flooding that lets you get out of the pond doesn't last long. Before you know it, you're stuck somewhere else, praying for another summer storm to come, slowly starving to death while simultaneously drying out. I don't know if fish can sense impending doom, but for me, the mere thought of the ditch fish nowadays just makes me viscerally uncomfortable, and a little sad.

We wind along the last elongated turn in the road, where the gravel goes from golden to rust-red, and wooden lake cabins of various sizes begin to pop up along its sides. At the end lies a wide gravel lot, where only a few trucks are parked. People are likely out on the lake, but they won't be by here. This side of Lake Franz, the side where last night's party was, has notoriously awful fishing. It's likely a mixture of the cliffs and the designated swimming area—although who would want to go swimming here is beyond me.

I park the truck at the very end of the lot and turn to Seb. Before I can say anything though, he puts his hands up and says, "Sorry Harris, but I don't think I'm down to make out in a parking lot in

broad daylight."

"What? Dude, what—no, no. C'mon, I have something to show you."

We climb out of the truck, our melting shakes in hand. I lock up behind us and toss Seb the keys, then look out at the lake's algae-covered surface, trying to process his words. Did he really think I would have brought him all the way here *just* to make out? Wow. Yeesh.

We're completely silent as we walk to the edge of the trail that winds down to the shore. But instead of taking it all the way, just a few feet onto the worn grass, I turn abruptly right, away from the path and into the treeline.

"Where are you going?" Seb asks, hesitating.

I look over my shoulder and grin at him. "You'll see."

He waits a moment longer; I don't stop. After a few seconds, he joins me, taking a few long strides with those damned legs of his. Didn't even have to jog to catch up, the lucky fucker.

I hold up a tree branch with my free hand and duck under. It's worse to do this at night, because you can never tell when you're about to walk into a spiderweb. Which, for me, is usually most of the time I do this at night (thanks, Liam), but oh well.

"Can I have, like, a hint or something?" Seb swats his way through a buzzing cloud of midges. "Or do you just wish for me to wallow in a puddle of anxiety?"

"Why did you say it like that?" My foot snaps a twig, and I feel it scratch my ankle.

"Like what?"

"All fancy or whatever. 'Do you wish' kinda shit. Who are you, Mr. Darcy?"

"Um, no."

"You're right." I smile. "You're much more of a Mr. Rochester."

Seb stumbles over some hidden rock in the weedy undergrowth. "Did you just *Jane Eyre* me?"

"Yes. Yes I did."

"Have you even read *Jane Eyre*?"

The accusation stings a little more than it should, but he's not wrong. "I just follow Sparknotes on Instagram."

"That ... really?"

"What? The memes are funny. I used to show them to Ms. Rothschild in English two and three. She gave me extra credit."

"Rothschild?"

The path begins to tilt a little more uphill as we maneuver our way between trees and around suspicious looking bushes. I'm leading us up the path that I know all too well—I'm excited to share this with him.

"Yeah, Rothschild. I was her favorite."

He sighs. I can hear he's already a little out of breath, even though it's only been about a minute. "Of course you were."

"What, you weren't?"

"Well for one," he says, "when you're in a class with Saanvi, the most you can hope for is second favorite."

"Oh, very true."

"And, no, she didn't like me. Probably because I gave a scathing review of her favorite book of all time, *The Grapes of Wrath*."

"Haven't read it."

"I know."

He can't see my facial expression from behind, but I'm smiling.

The incline gets just a little bit steeper, and now the pair of us are hunching forward slightly, trying not to fall but prepared to grab at anything.

"Can you please tell me where we're going?" Seb asks.

I don't even turn around. "Nope." This is fun.

"You're enjoying this, you bastard."

"Nope." Yeah, this is fun.

"Are you going to murder me? Is that it? Kill me and shove my frail little man body in the quarry?"

"That's only if you don't stop bugging me like a kid on a fourteen hour road trip."

There's silence. All that can be heard is bird chirps and the motor of a boat running off far in the distance.

"Are we there yet?"

"Plan B is seriously looking *so good* right now."

"Do it. Murder me. You won't."

"I will, and then I'll dump your *frail little man body* in the quarry to let the toxic waters dissolve your corpse like a rat in a can of Mountain Dew."

"Wait, that's so hot."

I don't even respond to him, just shake my head and smile. Besides, there's not much of a point to it anyways—we're here.

a/n - HOPE YOU'RE ENJOYING ILY finals have me dead byeeee

chapter ten

[image]

Sebastian

I've never been to the quarry's edge before. Never on this side, at least.

I can see across from us the long stretch of scenic backroad that winds alongside the quarry's southern edge. It's the only angle I've seen the quarry from before, aside from a sixth grade field trip to test the water pH one time.

The quarry itself is absolutely stunning, don't get me wrong. The water is a vibrant aquamarine, and it's so clear that you always think you should be able to see the bottom, even though it's way too deep for that. After all, this was a limestone quarry way back in the day. I remember that sixth grade field trip vividly (because I thought it was the coolest thing ever). The limestone rocks leach calcite crystals into the water, which is what gives it that alluring color. And while it's lovely to look at, it's stupidly dangerous.

Slightly older generations used to swim here all the time, and they'd end up getting sick. Now there's a sign every twenty feet or so that says in big, bold letters: *WARNING! Do not enter, as high pH levels may cause skin & eye irritations; stomach problems; and fungal infections such as thrush. Polluted stillwater known to contain: car wrecks; dead animals; excrement; trash.* Idiots from school still go diving here too, but I don't see myself ever being that brave. Or stupid.

So yeah, the quarry is gorgeous to look at, but it's definitely not for touching.

Almost as if he's reading my mind, Harris says, "How about we *don't* jump off this cliff today?"

"Ahahaha, you're so funny," I deadpan.

"And cute."

"Mm, debatable."

Harris wanders close enough to the quarry's edge (just to make me nervous, I'm sure) and sits down, crossing his legs again. He takes a long sip of his shake before—with a very high quality, super-mega-genius-level of thoughtfulness and confidence—retorting with, "Says the one who was making out with me last night."

Just thinking about last night makes my face go hot. He must notice, which, fuck. "That doesn't have to be a recurring thing."

He pouts. "Awwww. Don't you *wike* me?"

"You're gonna end up the Mountain Dew rat, not me."

An intensely grating sound fills the air while Harris tries to suck up the rest of his milkshake. He sighs afterward, smacking his lips dramatically. "Bet I taste like strawberries right now," he muses.

"Shut up." For some reason, the back of my neck feels hot too.

Almost as if he can tell how flustered I am (he definitely can), he gives me a coy smile. "Whaaat?"

"Shut up. Idiot."

"Awwwww. My feewings."

"That is actually so cringe, I want to puke."

"Hmm." Harris sets his empty cup down and looks up at me. Without him having to say anything, I sit down next to him, and he wiggles his eyebrows. "So?"

"So what?"

"Wanna, uh, makeout?" Surprisingly, his expression shifts from playful to serious in the literal second I spend hesitating. "Only if you want to, though. We don't have to."

I want to. I do. The thought of feeling Harris' lips against mine once more, the softness and sweetness of his mouth pulling me in and winding my insides up like taffy, is enough to make my whole body tingle. But I have to know if this is the real reason brought me here —not because he cared that I was uncomfortable at Paco's, but because he was horny and wanted some. For all I know, this is his spot. Maybe his and Liam's, even. The thought turns those wads of taffy into too-tight braids of nervousness.

"Are you.... Did you only invite me here to fool around?"

Our faces are mere inches apart, our hands in the grass behind us nearly touching. Harris leans back to get a better look at me. I try not to take extreme notice of his arms flexing, but it's hard. I do my best to focus instead on his face, at his quizzical, taken-aback expression. "No?"

"Are you sure? Because, you don't sound entirely convinced."

"I'm sure," he says, rubbing his shoulder. Fuck. Arms. "I thought you might like the view. I ... I'm sorry. I've been trying to make it clear that I don't want to make you feel like you have to fool around or anything, but ... yeah. I'm seriously okay to go without it. I'm really sorry I haven't been doing a good job of letting you know that."

I groan, dropping my chin down to my chest. I'm an asshole. "No, you're good, it's fine. I just wanted to be sure."

"No, yeah, I'm sorry," he says, all too quiet. He's focused on the quarry water, and I have to force myself not to look at him. His side profile is, for lack of better word, pretty. Beautiful, even. Maybe it's the way his lips curve softly into a doll-like Cupid's bow, or how his short, stubby eyelashes curve up just slightly, but he's honest to god gorgeous.

I lean over and nudge him playfully. "You're good, don't worry about it. I don't think you're trying to use me or anything." I definitely *did* think that, but when Harris hears this, he sits up a little straighter, and a tension I wouldn't have noticed otherwise leaves his face.

"I would never use you," Harris promises. Fuck. Fuck, he can't be hot *and* say things I didn't know I wanted to hear. "And if I ever, ever overstep your boundaries, I want you to tell me, okay? I promise to always ask, no matter what, but I just want you to know that I'm not here to disrespect you like that."

There's a part of me that's glad, comforted even, that he's saying these things. But the other part of me feels incredibly awkward. How do you respond to that? I've never had to before.

So I just nod and say, "Thanks. You too."

Harris smiles, thankfully. This seems to be enough.

"Can I kiss you?" I ask, but it comes out hoarse and strangled. I clear my throat, tips of my ears burning, and try again.

"Can ... can I kiss you?"

Harris' lips are on mine immediately, his hand gently settling on the back of my head. Our noses smush together for a second, until we both tilt our chins away at the same time. His breath is hot against my upper lip, but I don't mind it, because his kisses are feather-soft, and they taste like sugar. When our kisses open up a bit more and the tip of his tongue slides tentatively against my own, I can specifically taste the strawberry shake. I wonder if he can taste my malt, too.

He puts one hand on my side, right beneath my ribs, and gently guides me down onto the grass. The earth isn't so much soft as it is spongy, and I can feel the lingering dampness from last weekend's storm soaking the back of my shirt, but I don't even care.

It's tender. It's gentle. It's aching. We kiss for what might be seconds but could just as easily be hours. We kiss and we kiss, all in the same way, again and again and again—his hand cupping my cheek and resting softly against my diaphragm; my arms wrapped around his lower back. I'm all too aware of his pelvis resting closely to mine. I'm stuck on wondering if he's as excited as I am when he pulls away, takes a deep breath, and looks me straight in the eye.

"Hey," he says, and holy shit, his voice is so deep right now. How is it so deep? What the fuck? Testosterone? Is he making it like that? Men?

"Hey back," I tell him, and yep. Nowhere near as deep. Fuck.

Harris chuckles. "You're cute."

"Good to know."

His lips find mine again, his body covering my own in a way that feels far more pleasant than uncomfortable. My eyes are shut tightly, and I lose myself in his sweet, sweet mouth once again.

A/N - enjoy another update!! gonna be breezing through these, hopefully.

have a great day!

chapter eleven

[image]

Harris

My lips are raw and red when Seb drops me off back at home. I keep touching them without thinking about it. I'll snap out of thinking about how it felt to him beneath me like that, our rib cages and flesh barely separating our thudding heartbeats.

It's only four, which means my mom is definitely awake. For her, four is breakfast time. Her twelve-hour-long night shifts has her living nearly inverted days, but her sleep schedule got royally fucked over by the graduation ceremony and my grad party at Grandma's. Is being old being unable to easily recover from lost sleep? Or is it just that she's overworked?

Even though I know she's awake, I still try to be quiet coming into the house. But there's not really much of a point, because Mom is there, sitting on one of the too-high chairs at our too-high table. She's got a full face of makeup on, and her hair is slicked back into the coiled ponytail she prefers for work. Her scrubs were an M.D. grad gift from me and Grandma, a deep, dusty pink. She looks put together, but I know how tired she must be.

"Hey, Mom," I tell her, leaving my empty shake cup from Paco's on our stained coffee table. "When'd you get up?"

"Oh, an hour ago or so," she says. "Needed time for coffee and contemplation." She gives me a tired smile, flashing the gap between her teeth, and offers up the periwinkle ceramic mug in her hands as if I wouldn't have believed she was drinking coffee otherwise.

I reach out to hug her, and she sets the mug down before returning my embrace. Even now, sitting down, she's still taller than me, but I don't mind it. I think sometimes, I like the fact that I didn't get those tall genes from my mom. In a small way, it makes me feel like

I'm not growing up as fast as I don't want to be.

She presses a quick peck to my forehead before pulling away and immediately picking up the mug once more. There's a strong scent of coffee around her; coffee, and her favorite perfume, the one she's been using since I was a kid. Its familiarity is cozy. I know that it's probably to be expected of my own mother, but it's often that I feel so young around her. It's comforting.

My mom and I are actually very close. We're similar in a lot of ways —probably because I never had another parent to influence me— but we're fundamentally different in some others. For one, my mom wanted nothing more than to go to med school when she was my age, far away in Virginia. I just want to get a Business degree, because someone said it's useful and it's not like I had any other ideas, and I can't bear to go any farther than MNSU in Mankato.

She must find my lack of work ethic terribly mind-boggling at times, but she's normally pretty chill about it, so that's good. A cool but strict mom was probably the best thing I could have asked for. And she's gone at nights now, when I'm most involved in the behavior she'd murder me over.

"Have you had any breakfast yet?" I ask her.

"Uh, I was probably going to just do a bowl of cereal," she says. "We still have Lucky Charms, right?"

"Nope. Just Rice Krispies."

She sighs. "But those are for making bars for Grandma."

"Yup." If there's one Minnesotan custom, it's putting things in bars. I myself am a lemon bar man, but I can get jiggy with a good cereal bar every now and again. And homemade Rice Krispie treats kinda hit different. They're subpar only to Fruity Pebbles bars.

She leans back in her chair and draws her mouth into a tight line. "I need to go grocery shopping."

"It's fine, I should have grabbed more cereal the other day. Besides, you know you can't help yourself on a Hy-Vee trip."

"That *is* true."

"It's cool," I promise her. "How about I make us some omelettes, and then I'll go grocery shopping tonight."

"Fine, okay. Thanks, bub. Do you need my card?"

"Still got change from the other day."

"Oh, you little thief."

I'm already in the kitchen, pulling out a glass to whisk the eggs together. "Do you want your little floppy egg cakes or not, mother? Huh? Huh?"

"Fine, go, make me these 'little floppy egg cakes.'"

Once I'm out of Mom's sight, whisking spinach in with the eggs, my fingers wander towards my fingers once more, a completely subconscious action. He tasted like a mix of chocolate and mint chapstick. Just thinking about the feeling of him against me, his lips and his hands and his tongue and ... fuck. Fuck.

Focus on your eggs, Harris.

"What do you have going on tonight?" Mom asks. She's still at the dining table, her back turned to me. Her non-coffee mug hand massages the back of her neck.

"Nothing much." It's not a lie. Liam hasn't texted me all day, and he's usually the one who decides what we do. It's especially funny, considering he said he'd 'see me tmrw,' but I doubt he's even awake right now. I just hope that Eli Wakeman didn't have any issues getting him home. When Liam is fucked up, those issues can range from "disconcerting" to "downright terrifying." So hopefully Eli is okay. He's built like a linebacker, but with Liam, you never really know.

And I might hate myself for it, but I'm kinda glad it was someone else. I hate waking up the next morning and wondering just what the fuck happened the night before. And I hate that Liam can push my buttons to get me to that point, no matter what the situation.

That he has some strange power over me, one where I find myself doing things I never quite agreed to. For the sake of my own sanity, I have no choice but to take his word. What Liam says happened, happened. It had to have. Before New Years, I never had a serious issue with it. Nowadays, I'm honestly happy when someone can take him home. It makes me a shitty best friend, I know, but ... I'm not sorry for being selfish. Not this time. Mostly. Somewhat.

"No? No Liam?" Mom hates Liam. She says she can tell that he's trouble, but she also said that I'm going to be friends with him anyways, and so long as I keep in mind her fervent hatred of him (she used "fervent," specifically), she's not going to get in my way. Most days, that's fine. Others, I almost wish she would.

"You can't get pregnant," she'd said on multiple occasions, "but that boy is probably a cesspool of filth and downright nastiness. So you use a condom, alright? It's better than nothing, although...." and then she'd trail off into herpes transmission statistics until I'd beg her to stop.

Chill doctor moms are really interesting for sex ed, but I guess it's better than the literal nothing on gay sex from high school sex ed.

"Nope," I tell her, "no Liam. Haven't heard from him all day actually."

Mom snorts into the rim of her coffee mug. "How late were you two out last night?"

"I got back pretty early, actually. Like, eleven-ish, I think."

"Mm. And how'd you get that cut on your forehead?"

Fuck. I completely forgot about the Band-Aid on my temple. I actually don't like lying to my mom, believe it or not. I think that's why I just avoid her when I have a secret, which also makes it super obvious when I do have a secret. So usually, telling the truth wins with my mom. She's pretty accepting of everything, which is really fucking awesome.

I debate telling the truth on this one though. How much about

Sebastian do I want to tell her? She'll probably draw it out anyways, but ... should I?

"A classmate brought me back last night," I tell her. Not a lie, just not the whole truth. What's the word? An admonition? Something like that. Sebastian would know. "We almost hit a rabbit, and when he stopped, I just kinda went forward."

Great, now she's putting the coffee mug down and standing up. She wipes her palms on the pants of her scrubs. "C'mere, take it off."

"It's fine, I'm fine!" But she's already in front of me, peeling the Band-Aid away, which is so not fun, because I put honey on it like a good little boy, and it always feels weird to have a still-very-sticky Band-Aid just torn off like that. I kinda get skeeved out by the feeling, although I couldn't possibly explain how.

"Hmm," she says. "Was it bleeding bad?"

"It literally stopped by the time we got home."

"*We*," she says, leaning back and giving me an incredulous look through her thick-lensed glasses. Her eyes seem a little bigger than they are with those glasses—right now especially, they look like bug-eyes. "Who's *we*, huh?"

"No one," I tell her. Why am I lying about this? And why am I lying so *poorly* about this? "Just the guy who dropped me off at home. We're barely even friends, seriously."

"Mmmmmhmm, alright." She walks into the kitchen to throw the Band-Aid away and looks back at me. "And it's not Liam?"

"It's not Liam."

She grins. "Alright."

"Stop, that's creepy, Mom."

"Alright, alright, alright," she drawls.

"Stop, I'm calling CPS."

"Can't. You're eighteen. Get out."

"Somedays, I'd love to."

Mom just laughs, because she knows how much of a lie that is. And, honestly, I'm glad that it is one.

a/n -

freshman year of college is done, which is just crazy as all heck. but i think i did ... okay?? hopefully this remains my weakest semester here. i'll be okay with that. and i've got some fun stuff coming up next semester; my business communications professor from last semester wants me to join her research lab on AI and also told me to join the business honors program, sooooo, yaasssssss.

i stopped writing a bit because i had some articles to write for my radio's blog (radioutd.com!!!! i embarrass myself sometimes, it's super funny :'D). also, i wrote a 19 page paper on fertility fraud state legislation for a gov class and set "some kind of record" for my citations length lmfao. so we are thriving

anyways, got more update coming up soon, so hope you guys enjoyed this chapter!! thanks for being here <3

chapter twelve

[image]

Sebastian

Saanvi is laying on my bed, her thick black hair hanging off the edge of my twin-sized mattress. It's so long that the ends of it, dyed a bright electric blue that reminds me of the quarry waters, touch my ancient wooden floor.

She's holding her phone up above her head, scrolling through people's stories on Snapchat. I'm not much better off, doomscrolling through the Dartmouth 2026 page. I'd been avoiding it as much as I could, because it was such a temptation while I was trying to study for my APs. Dartmouth doesn't take all of them, like my now-useless 5 in AP Bio and 4 in AP Chem, but I was working hard to get some of them in, like Calc and Comp Sci.

But now that we've officially graduated, I don't have to hold off any longer. I'm in Instagram stalking heaven. Most of the people seem fine, whatever. Some of them are exceptionally nerdy-looking, but others seem kind of dude-bro-ish. I keep showing the screen to Saanvi and asking for her feedback. She knows me well enough to guess the point that I'm about to make before I can even get the words out.

"Hey, Sanv," I say, "thoughts."

The phone screen is a brooding boy with nutmeg hair and a stout but muscular frame. His photos are a bunch of hiking and one of him holding a trombone, the last one with a giant robotic LEGO structure.

Saanvi doesn't roll over, so I turn the phone screen upside down. She holds her pointer finger out to scroll, biting her lip in concentration. "Ummm, I'm gonna say he looks like the type to play ping pong using laptops as paddles."

"Oh totally, yeah."

She swipes to the next photo. Her eyes go wide with surprise, and a little bit of intrigue. "Ooh, shirtless pic? That's thirsty."

"Is it thirsty, or confident?" I ask, leaning back to look at the picture in question. The guy is cute enough, but the six pack really is kind of doing it for me. He's on a cliff's edge, poised like he's about to jump. Fuck, it's reminding me of my idiotic little jump last night. I don't know why I did that, but ... well. Yeah. I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe I wanted to cool down and figured I couldn't back out if I just jumped. Fifteen feet. *Live a little*. Fuck you, me.

"In his case, probably both. He looks like he would condescend to you about Marxism."

"Like he thinks nihilism is the hottest shit," I add, "but probably also thinks social Darwinism is a valid concept."

Saanvi snorts. "He looks like the type to tell you all about poverty in America from his dad's hot tub, and then turn around and say if people were more educated, they could get out of it."

"Oh, like Brady Evans?"

"Oh, fuck Brady Evans. But yeah, totally like Brady Evans."

I scroll up to the next pic. This one is a cute guy in a flannel, with floppy blond hair and an easy-going smile, poised in front of a corn field.

"Ooh, Midwestern Heartthrob Boy," Saanvi says, finally rolling over. I readjust my phone. She swipes over to the next picture—a happy little border collie that's licking his face while he laughs and tries to shield himself. Fuck, okay, cute.

"He's cute," I offer (redundantly).

"That's your type?" Saanvi asks, rolling over. "Little goofy blond boys who mix flannels and athleisure wear?"

Huh. "Maybe."

She gives me an incredulous look. "So ... then, do you think Harrison McCammon is cute?"

"What? Absolutely not." But I pretend to balk a moment too soon, and she gives me a knowing glance. "What?"

Her eyes widen. "Stop, you *do* think he's cute!"

"Saanvi—"

"*Sebastian*! Seb. Seb. Harris McCammon? C'mon."

"What?" It's almost as if I can feel the beads of sweat beginning to appear on my forehead, a cartoonish representation of my discomfort. I actually don't know what she's going to say to this one.

Her hands are clutching my dark blue comforter. "Stop, stop, no, no, nope."

"What?"

"I cannot believe this!"

"*What?*"

Inexplicably, she shrugs. "I'm just ... flabbergasted."

If she's flabbergasted now, I don't want to know how she'll react when I tell her that Harrison and I seem to be becoming friends with benefits.

"Can you blame me?" I ask her. "He's hot." I let my head flop back against the mattress, lolling over to the side to look at her. She stares back. Saanvi has these wide almond shaped eyes that always seem to shine, especially when she adds this subtle little smidge of champagne-colored eyeshadow on her inner corner. She's actually really pretty, something I think is easy to forget because she acts like she doesn't think about looking attractive, and she's also too smart for people to know what to do with, so she gets overlooked too often. But, between the two of us, she's definitely the pretty best friend.

"You're simping for fucking *Harrison* now?" she asks. "I just cannot wrap my brain around this."

"I—"

"Actually, no, no, I take that back. When he ran after you last night, I was surprised, but then he jumped off a fifteen foot cliff for you, no hesitation. Now that's kinda hot. I get it."

That's never not going to be embarrassing to me. "Yeah, no that's ... that's hot."

She gives me a downright bombastic side eye. "Did you guys hook up?"

I groan and sink down to the floor, lying there in a jumbled pile.

Saanvi gasps. She practically soars off the mattress and lands next to me, just to deliver unto me a sharp swat to the arm. "You did! Oh my god, what did you guys do? You, and Harrison? Fuuuuck, Seb, fuuuuuuuck! And you didn't call me immediately after?"

I roll onto my back and cross my arms across my chest. "How do *you* know we did anything?"

"Shut up! Shut up, you did, and you're being weird, and this is precisely how I know you *did* hook up with him. You hooked up with Harrison McCammon, you saucy boy!"

I wrinkle my nose. "Ew, let the words 'saucy boy' stay in Capulet's mouth, please."

Saanvi rolls up the sleeves of her burnt orange sweatshirt, then proceeds to playfully whack me once more. "Spill." *Whack*. "The." *Whack*. "Tea." *Whackwhackwhack.*

"Hmmm, I don't kiss and tell."

Her gasp is high-pitched and strangled-sounding. She all but flies backwards. "STOP, you didn't."

"What, make out?" I smile and close my eyes, shifting my arms to

behind my head. "Maybe."

"Augh!" She shakes her head emphatically, sending her curly hair flying. "You're acting terribly rakish and roguish, Seb!"

"Maybe."

Saanvi runs her hands through her blown out curtain bangs, then shakes her head again. "I literally cannot believe this. Who knew he had it in him?"

"I know."

"I mean," she continues on, clearly about to go off on a Saanvi Tangent™, "I always figured his balls were too far in Liam Grande's purse for there to be any hope for him. Because, Liam is enough of a prick that I figured it would take one to be friends with one, but I guess he must be more chill than I thought. That's only partly on me though, because they get along too well for Harrison not to speak fluent asshole. But ... you had fun? You like him? Wait, are you dating now?"

"We—"

"That would be way too fast. Nope, sorry, sorry, sorrysorrysorry. Sorry. Go on."

I smile politely. "*Thank you*, Saanvi."

"Ey. Don't push your luck."

I roll my eyes at her before staring straight up at my slowly whirring ceiling fan. "I'm actually not sure what it is that we're doing. I think we're friends with benefits? We just agreed to keep it casual."

Without even having to look, I can feel Saanvi's frown. "Rude. Do we want me to murder him? I will gladly murder him. And I'd do such a good job too."

I close my eyes. Saanvi isn't a hookup kind of person, so this might be the part that she doesn't understand. Granted, I'm not much of a

hookup kind of person myself, which only adds more to the irony that is my current situation with Harris. "No, no, it was me who suggested it, actually."

"Whaaaat? Seb, why?"

I sit up and toss my hands in the air. "I don't know! I just, I asked him what we were doing, and then he's all like, 'I don't know, what do you want it to be,' and then I was like, no way does Harrison McCammon want something serious with an asshat like me, and so I was like, 'oh hey that's chill yeah let's just keep this casual.'"

I'm standing up now and am starting to pace. Thank goodness neither of my parents are home—they'd probably be so concerned right now. "And like, Saanvi, what does that even *mean*? 'Let's keep this casual?' I'm new at this. I don't understand the apparent intricacies of what I signed up for. 'Casual,' Saanvi, what is 'casual'?"

"Uhhh...." Saanvi kind of just shrugs from her spot on the floorboards. "Not dating but almost? Maybe? A no-strings-attached situation? I don't know."

"*Uuuuaaaauuurrrrrgggghhhhhh!"*

"Okay okay, so, aside from that sound you just made—which is a totally valid sound to be making right now, no judgement, bestie—what do you think Harrison wanted this to be?"

I blink. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, like, maybe he put the decision off on you because he didn't know what he wanted. But if you had to guess, what would you say right now?"

"I don't know, ugghhh."

"Okay, well." She stands and readjusts the waist of her leggings. "I think this is an incredibly new development, and that you gotta give it a few days before you decide how you feel about this situation. Who knows, maybe 'just friends' is a perfect idea for you right now."

It certainly doesn't feel like that, honestly. It feels more like my world is about to cave in on itself, because I haven't sat down with myself to even begin processing how I feel about this. What am I doing? What is he doing? What are *we* doing, and how committed do I need a partner to be for that?

"What do you mean, 'just friends' might be good for right now?" I ask, sitting down on the edge of my bed.

Saanvi stands now, and which weirdly makes this feel like a study session. We both walk when we're trying hard to think. We would be walking circles around each other these past four years that we were on the debate team, going over every single possible case point and contention until we figured we were unbeatable. Half the time, it felt like we shared the same brain.

"Well, think about it like this: you've only been with Evan, who is a useless hunk of shit of a human being and I hope he rots in the deepest, coldest circle of Hell."

"It was an amicable breakup," I mumble.

She points at me. "Bullshit."

"Whatever." She's right, but like ... whatever.

"*Whatever*." She sighs. "Anyways, what's the point of starting a relationship less than three months before you go off to university? You're going to New Hampshire, and he's staying in Minnesota, going to Mankato or something. So that's gotta be, what, like, twenty-three hours distance or something?"

Math checks out, so I nod.

"You've never done long distance before," she says, walking around in a circle, stopping at my desk to grab my ancient glow in the dark fidget spinner. She spins it as she walks, staring at the wall, retracing familiar footsteps with bare feet on hardwood.

"Right."

"Remember you rejected that guy from Eden Prairie? All because

you thought long distance would be too hard."

I wince at the mere memory. Alex Scheffers. Hot Lincoln-Douglas debater. What else was I supposed to do? "Yeah."

"So ... why start anything committed now?"

I don't answer her right away, because even though I know that she's right, it feels off somehow. "Yeah...."

"Unless, of course, you like him. In which case, I think you should say something instead of suffering in silence, like I *know* you have the tendency to do."

I groan.

"So, you do like him," she says, stopping her pacing to look me right in the eye.

"I mean ... maybe."

"But you're not going to do anything about it, are you?"

"Oh yeah, most definitely no."

She just sighs, shakes her head, and flops down on the bed next to me. "Harrison McCammon."

"Oh, believe me. I know." And we sigh, precisely at the same time.

a/n - not going to lie, I accidentally hit "publish" so HAVE A FREE UPDATE WOOT

chapter thirteen

[image]

harris

I'm changing shirts in my room when a sudden knock on the basement window has me nearly jump right out of my skin

There's only one person who knocks on my window. I nearly head straight to open it, but I decide to make him wait, choosing instead to slip into the fresh yellow T-shirt I just took from the dryer. It's warm, and after having just dried off from my shower, it's like the hug I didn't know I needed.

Then I walk across my room and pull open the blinds.

Liam crouches in the window well before me, his shaggy hair a mess around his face. He has dark, sunken eyes and cheekbones so sharp, they make his face look hollow. He's truly a haunting figure, just there in his little $uicideboy$ sweatshirt and baggy jeans, staring right at me, looking half hyper-focused, half completely phased out.

I take the screen off and open the window. He immediately puts his legs through and slides himself in, landing on his feet just as he does every time. I've seen him make the jump hammered beyond reason too many times to count. "Hey," he says, "you've been awful quiet today."

"What do you mean by that?" It kind of bugs me that he just came right in, but I can't exactly blame him, seeing as Liam's arrivals at my basement window are routine now.

"Dunno." He shrugs. "You just usually text at least once, even to see if I didn't die the night before. Nothing."

"You were with Eli Wakeman," I point out. "I figured you were taken care of." Everyone knows that Eli keeps strictly sober. He's

also straight, with a girlfriend at UMN Twin Cities, meaning he probably just took Liam home out of some kinda civic duty bullshit. Which, yeah, good on him. Seriously.

Liam shrugs again. I kind of hate it when he shrugs a bunch. Honestly, sometimes, I anti-hate Liam. I can't get enough of him. But other times, every single little thing he does bugs the shit out of me to such an extent that I think I could go right ahead and strangle him, Homer and Bart Simpson-style.

"Whatever," I tell him. "You're alive, aren't you."

He grins. His teeth are yellow, stained with nicotine from years of cigarettes and vaping. I do my best to keep my teeth clean and white, especially after my mom found out about my little habit a few months ago. We tried our best to break it, but I still sneak them when I'm with Liam. Which, really, is frequent enough that it's less so a thing I do sometimes, more so "I'm still very much addicted." What my mother doesn't know won't kill her.

"You're in a sassy mood today," he says, reaching out to pick a piece of fuzz off my shirt. When he suddenly leans in to try and kiss me, I can smell the faintest trace of alcohol on his breath. If he's here just for sex—which, right now, I feel like he is—he's probably more under the influence than I realize.

His lips are right in front of mine, but I lean back instead of forward. "Are you high?" He doesn't smell *super* strongly of alcohol, but knowing him, he's on something. Maybe he's cross-faded. He gets super horny when he's crossed.

"Come on, you know this isn't about that," he says, reaching out to try and grab my forearm. "I just missed you is all."

His palm is rough yet damp against my skin; his eyes are wider than usual, his smile a little too lopsided. It's the same expression he made at Elana Doorsey's New Year's party when he tried to lock the door of her basement bathroom. Liam's inebriated state had been funny before that—I was so high that I said to the guy standing next to us, "Oh my God he is *so high*, look," and then took a picture of Liam and showed it to him. Neither of us should have been as

fucked up as we were; it was an obvious recipe for disaster.

I don't like thinking about that though. Thinking back to the bathroom makes me feel uncomfortable all over again. I know he didn't mean anything by it. He apologized after, and he really was *so high*, but he didn't listen to me when I said to stop, so. Here we are.

I'm just not gonna let that happen again.

I jerk my arm away from him. His fingers leave my skin a little sweaty in their wake, which, ew. Gross. Not important right now. "Liam, let me drive you home."

He rolls his eyes. "Oh my God, Harris, come *on*. I know you want me too."

Yep. There it is. "I'm not going to do anything with you when you're like this," I insist. It feels like teaching a four-year-old to share or something. "You know that."

"Oh, fuck you. Fuck you." He spits the words at me, as if they're poisonous. I don't even flinch. Par for the course. "I fucking hate it when you're sanctimonious like this. It's just sex, Harris. We've been fooling around for years. Quit being so fucking..."—he struggles to find the words—"*precious* about it."

He's got to be crossed. He's only like this when he is. Drunk Liam is witty and biting; High Liam is mellow and easily amused; and Crossed Liam is a cruel, horny bastard with no regard for others.

"Let me take you home," I insist.

He inhales slowly and closes his eyes. "No. My parents are home."

Right. It's not that Liam has issues with his parents. It's not even that they abhor the fact that he gets wasted and high and shit—they're just chill/neglectful enough to not care. But they hate the gay thing. Not Liam for being gay, but for doing it quote-unquote "under their roof." And that's why Liam doesn't want to go home: because he wants me to go in with him.

"Liam. No."

He takes a step closer, his eyes hazy. His lips are their same usual strawberry red, but they're chapped, with white, dead flakes of skin peeling off. And he's got a massive pimple there on his Cupid's bow, big and white and poppable. Even if I wanted to kiss him right now, this would deter me. But I wouldn't have kissed him regardless, icky Spongebob-style face close-up or no. I don't hook up with people when they're high and I'm sober, for one. And I try not to do the same when we're both in that situation. Liam *knows* this.

"You've gotta go," I tell him. "Am I taking you home?"

"Fuuuuck you."

"Alright, get out. Text me when you're back home safe, or I'm calling your parents."

"Fuck off, you fucking bag of dicks."

"Love you too."

Liam—miraculously, somehow—manages to pull himself back out of my window well and stalks off in the direction opposite the setting sun. Not the way back to his house, but whatever. I just cannot deal with this right now.

I don't know why my hands are shaking, but they are. I try clenching them into fists to make it stop. It doesn't work. My heart is hammering, and it's as if with every beat, it's pounding its way further up my esophagus. Each time it pounds against my ribcage, it reverberates through my whole body. I sit down on the edge of my bed and try to control my breathing.

I hate it when Liam is like this. Fuck. He *always* oversteps. And it's not his fault—he's beyond fucked up when he tries to do this shit. But it's scary. I haven't always kicked him out of the house. Sometimes, I let him do it, even when I'm sober, even though I feel disgusting afterwards. And then there were a few times where Liam said we were both fucked up, but I don't really remember much of anything. And even though he's my best friend, and even though I

make myself take his word for it, I hate it. It's terrifying. Sometimes, times like these, I wish I was stronger. That I'd listen to my mom. That I'd quit being his friend. But it's hard. It's hard, and so I don't.

I roll onto my side and lay there with my eyes closed until I can no longer feel my heart's too-strong pulse all the way in my fingertips. It's just enough to allow me to take a deep breath and unclench my fists.

I pull out my phone from beneath my pillow and check a plethora of missed texts, all from mainly other track team guys. There's a party going on, an Elana Doorsey party. She's on the track team with us, a long jump girl, and she usually throws epic ragers. She and I aren't close, but she's sweet. Still, seeing her name, thinking about Liam and the last party, and what Seb said happened between us ... I don't know that I want to go.

Still. There's a part of me that knows I'm going to go, no matter what. So might as well invite someone I trust to keep an eye on me. Someone who's *not* Liam.

A/N - y'all the way I just had so much fun at a Hippo Campus concert that it compensated for me forgetting the key card to my future roommate's dorm and rendering myself maybe a little bit homeless for three days and two nights. I'm supposed to go on a date on Friday night too but we'll see if I can get in, do laundry, and shower on time. L. O. L.

(Don't worry though, one of my bosses at the radio station is super nice and is letting me crash on her couch. And her roommate is apparently my favourite Starbucks barista??? Small world af.)

Anyways, hope you enjoyed this week's chapter!!!! Yaaassss!!!! See you next Friday!

chapter fourteen

[image]

Sebastian

Saanvi must open the message right when I do—a new Instagram group chat, with me, her, and Harrison, of all people. Her response is immediate.

HarrisMcC'mon : hey guys, there's a party at Elana Doorsey's tonight if y'all wanna come

saanvigaddaaaam : I mean, I'm not doing anything

My head flies up. "Saanvi, what?"

She shrugs at me. "What? I'm not. You're not. We could totally go."

"Since when have you wanted to go to a party with Harrison McCammon?"

"Um, maybe since he valiantly sprinted across Lake Franz to go rescue you from your weird, concerning cliff yoga?"

"You make him sound like Jesus when you put it like that."

"Or a common basilisk."

I blink. "Saanvi, you're gonna need to translate that one for me."

"They're lizards that run across water. You really need to fall down more internet rabbit holes, my friend. Also, don't change the subject."

"I'm not changing the subject. Please explain how I am attempting to change the subject."

"*A-ha-ha*." My phone buzzes with a new message, very much possibly from Harris, but I don't answer. Neither does Saanvi. "Seb,

let's just go. We always talked about going to more parties after high school. Soon, we'll be several states away from each other, and I'll only get to bother you when it's snowing outside. So can we please just go?"

Her eyes are pleading. It's impossible to say no to her when she's like this, so I sigh, shoulders slumping in defeat. "Fine, fine. We can go."

She squeals, launching herself across the bed to wrap her arms around me. "You're the best! I love you so much, you stupid little poopy head."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You make me wish I were straight."

"Stop, I'll cry." She squeezes me. "You make me wish I were a stocky little Midwestern boy with an off-putting obsession with flannel and Nike shorts."

"Shut up."

"Oh absolutely not. Never."

—

My parents are home earlier than I'd anticipated them to be. They were at a book club at one of the two cafes on Main Street, although I can never remember which one. They're still arguing—perpetually arguing, I swear—about some plot point when Saanvi and I come downstairs.

I don't miss the knowing look they cast at each other. I think they used to be uneasy when Saanvi and I would spend so much time alone when freshman year started. Although we'd been best friends since Saanvi moved here at age seven, when we entered high school, a girl and a boy being friends was suddenly a cause for concern. But I kind of got it. My parents were high school sweethearts, after all. They've always assumed Saanvi and I are secretly the same thing. If only they knew my real secret—that Saanvi and I could never secretly date. (Shocker, I know.)

Over the years, they've become more and more used to me spending

time around Saanvi. I'm guessing it's probably because we never changed in the way we treated each other. We've always been more like siblings than anything else. And Saanvi's parents have a strict no-dating rule, one which she only ever defied once in our sophomore year. I helped her sneak out on one date to Paco's, and she decided that she hated the guy so much that she was just going to wait until either a "smoking hot bad boy boxer with a heart of gold" transferred to our high school, or college.

My parents break the knowing look and glance back at us. "What were you guys up to?"

"Nothing much," I say, then wait for Saanvi to take point. She always does; she's a significantly better liar than me. It's one of the most beautiful perks of our friendship.

"We're headed to a friend's little get-together tonight," she says. "I'm dragging Seb to my house so I can change, and then we'll be on our way."

"Which friend is it?" my dad asks. He's got my same dark, crazy hair as me, but that's where the similarity ends. He's incredibly short, for starters, and he's got inexplicably bronzey-olive skin, of such a pigmentation that I could never hope to achieve it, even with a summer on the Mediterranean coast or something. I'm paler than my mother as well—probably the result of frequently staying indoors and studying instead of doing anything productive that doesn't involve four air-conditioned walls and a roof.

"We're going with Harrison McCammon," Saanvi says, like it's a name they ought to know already. "His mom is Dr. McCammon?"

"I know his mom." Judging by my mom's tone, I can't tell if that's a good thing or a bad thing. "She was Aunt Sarah's classmate."

"Which one?" Dad asks, furrowing his brow. That's another thing we share: crazy brows. I shape mine in secret, but Dad's nearly reach his hairline. They give him this perpetually angry look, which is especially unfortunate when paired with his rosacea.

Mom frowns. Potentially bad. "Oh, y'know, the one who got

pregnant right before med school? No one knows the father except her?"

"Ohhhh," Dad says. "The *Mama Mia* lady. So her son is the one who...."

Before he can say anything bad, I interject with, "The track and cross-country captain? Remember, he got a big scholarship to a state school?"

There. This seems to appease my parents. "Oh, good for him," my mom says, giving me the same smile she normally reserves for her young kindergartners. I try my best not to feel at least a *little* bit patronized. "He's the one that broke the state record for the four-hundred meter dash, right?"

Relief floods my veins. If there's one thing my parents appreciate, it's hard work and talent. "Yep," Saanvi says, smiling too wide, "that's him."

"Who else will be there?" Dad asks, but Mom places a hand on his arm.

"Well, go have fun," she says. "You deserve to, after all the work you've been putting in this year. Just remember to be safe, and be responsible. You can lose your scholarship at any time, hon."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I say, smiling. "I'm just gonna go change shirts and I'll be right down."

"I'll be here," Saanvi says, tight-smiled.

I skip to stairs at a time, all the way up to my room, then throw on a green-on-green striped shirt. I walk back to the mirror hanging on the back of my door and try to smooth back my hair with my hands.

Fuck. I look like the guy from *Blue's Clues*. That's awful. I take off the shirt and switch it out for a white and blue-striped one, which, okay, why are the only shirts I own striped? Also, this is giving Evan Hansen, and I'm not here for it.

I end up settling on something that feels almost too formal, but I don't know what else I could do. A black button-up shirt with blue jeans is such a hodgepodge of fashion sensibilities that I kinda want to puke in my mouth, just a little bit, but after I add a tiny bit of gel to my hair to not tame it, not entirely, but instead to give it more of a sense of direction, it just might work. My cheeks are sallow, and my brow seems darker than usual. Maybe Saanvi will have an idea of what to do with the rest of this, but if I come downstairs looking too good, my parents will be way too freaked out to let me leave.

Thankfully, when I get downstairs, they must have left to go watch TV in their bedroom or something, while Saanvi is sitting alone on the couch, playing Fruit Ninja on her phone with her back to me.

I put my hand on her shoulder and she jolts, whipping around. Her mouth falls open.

"I'm sorry, but why do you look kind of *hot* right now?" she asks, her eyes melodramatically raking up and down my body. "Holy shit, Seb, all this for little old Harrison? Dayum, sis."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I feel like a disphit."

"That's because you *are* a dipshit. But also, this could work. Do you have a gold chain or anything?"

"Do I look like I own a gold chain, Saanvi?"

"Yeah, alright." She frowns up at me. "Alright, what if we did a little bit of makeup?"

"Umm, I don't think makeup is my vibe either. Also, do you have anything for my skintone?"

She waves me off. "It wouldn't have been a full face, but you're fine. That's the only idea I would have had for you, so—"

"Shoes? Are my shoes okay?"

"Seb." She puts her hands on my upper arms. "You look fine. You're literally okay. Actually, if you had any makeup on, you'd probably look like a Walmart Billie Joe Armstrong, if he didn't leave the

house for twelve years."

"Thanks?"

"I'm not helping."

"You are so not helping."

"Just, urgh!" She tosses her hands in the air, her hands claw-like in her exasperation. "You. Look. Good. Okay? Can you just take my word on this, this once?"

She's glaring up at me, her eyebrows contorted into a pleading stare. I smile. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, fine. I look good."

"Fuck yeah you do. Fucking bitch."

A/N - I MOVED TODAY

chapter fifteen

[image]

tw: attempted SA

Harris

The room isn't spinning, but it certainly is fuzzy. There's a permanent lump in my throat, the one that's always there when I'm a little too drunk, but not "throw up" drunk. I kept getting invited to do shots with people, and I lost count after seven. I know I'm not doing too hot, but I also don't feel like I'm entirely in my body just now, so, sorry, I don't know what I'm doing.

I like drinking with friends more than drinking alone, but here I am. I'd even take my usual party buddy. I don't know if Liam knows about this party, or if he's at home sobering up like I'd hoped. Either way, I haven't seen him. Same with Saanvi and Seb.

"Hey," someone says, pressing a Red Solo cup into my palm, "water."

I don't want to drink water, and I know I shouldn't trust drinks from strangers, but who here would roofie me? I'm already fucked up anyways. And Seb is on the way. I'll be okay.

I chug the water. Most of it runs down the sides of my mouth, rushing straight down my neck and soaking my T-shirt. It's warm and musty and tastes a little too strongly of metal, but I don't even care. I set the cup down on the bookshelf next to me and stumble into the living room.

There's a crowd dancing in front of the Doorsey's fireplace. Some hip hop bullshit I hate listening to but never complain about. A girl I don't recognize slides up in front of me and bats up at me with wide, dark eyes. Her hair is long and stick-straight, reaching down past her waist, and her crop top showcases her ostentatious belly ring. Heh. Ostentatious. Good word. Seb word.

"You're cute," she shouts over what's probably Baby Keem.

"What?"

"You're cute!"

"Oh." I close my eyes because the room is closer to spinning now, but I find myself smiling. "Thanks."

"Do you know bachata?" she shouts.

"Do I what?" I stumble slightly. Someone next to me grabs my shoulders and pushes me back to standing. Everyone around us keeps on dancing. It's like I'm not even there.

She says it again, and I mumble, "I don't know," my eyes still closed.

She grabs my wrists and pulls my hands onto her waist. "Here, I'll show you."

I'm stumbling while she's trying to dance with me. It's too many steps forward, too many steps back. I can't keep my head on straight, and then the girl is turning around, bending over and dancing in front of me, and goddammit, doesn't she know I'm gay?

"I—I'm good," I try to tell her, but she doesn't seem to hear. She just keeps dancing, brushing up against me once and making me step back, and the room feels lopsided, and my head is light and heavy all at once. "I'm gonna.... I'm gonna go."

My hands flail out in front of me while I stumble to the kitchen island, where there's a shit ton of Trulies and a giant batch of jungle juice, among other kinds of alcohol, many of which I have already ingested.

"Hey, are you good?" someone asks. I glance up, and there's Evan, wearing exactly what he was earlier today at Paco's. "You're freaking sloshed, man."

"Evan," I say. "Hey." Bile rises up in my throat. I push it down.

"Have you had any water?" he asks.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I'm good. But, hey. Uh. Why, why did you cheat on Seb?"

The music keeps pounding. Everyone keeps dancing. But Even freezes. "What did you just ask me?"

"You cheated on Seb. With my friend. On your boyfriend."

Evan looks around. His face falls. "Rachel, hey, wait."

I don't get why he gets to look so upset when he's the one who made Seb feel like shit. "Rachel? Were you still fooling around with Seb and Liam when—"

I don't even have time to process Evan's LED-illuminated fist soaring towards my face, but I hear the sharp crack of my nose when it connects.

People say you see stars when you're punched in the face. All I see is painful black.

There are a few shouts of "Hey!" and "What the fuck, Evan?!" and I'm trying not to fall over. It's too hard. I'm stumbling backwards, back back back, right into a strong, hard chest. My hands are pressed against my nose. There's a steady flow of hot, gushing blood streaming from between my fists, right onto my favorite yellow shirt. My nose is on fucking *fire*.

"You okay?" someone says, their voice raspy, gruff. I feel a tiny smidge of relief. Liam. Liam will take care of me. "Let's get you to the bathroom."

"Okay," I mumble, leaning hard into him. I try not to move my hands away from my nose, but it's beginning to feel gross. There's blood already flaking on the back of my hands, and my palms are sticky where blood is drying, right where the skin of my palms creases. Everything smells like copper and alcohol and fuck, fuck, I feel like I'm going to vomit.

Thankfully, Liam's arm is tight around my shoulders, hugging me against his side. I can barely make my way through the crowd. Vertigo. That's a thing, right? Dizziness? Fuck, what does vertigo

mean? Seb would know. I use big words and don't know what they mean. Seb uses them, and he just *knows*. He's so smart.

"Come on, let's go to the bedroom," Liam says.

My mind is racing. At least it's not the basement bathroom. "Why the bedroom?" I ask.

His arm around me tightens. "They have an en suite," he says.

"Ohhhh." Duh. Of course. It hurts, but I manage a small smile, just for myself. See? Liam would never hurt me. Liam doesn't hurt me. Liam really *is* a good friend.

"You're *so* drunk, Harrison" he says, and maybe it's the blood still gushing from my nose, but I don't think Liam's drunk at all. Usually, he'd be slurring a little bit, and he wouldn't be this nice, right? Yeah. Yeah, he's usually sassy and sarcastic and thinks it's funny to be mean and hurt my feelings. So maybe he's high? He was pretty out of it earlier. Yeah. Yeah, he's probably just high.

So I just laugh. "Yeah, yeah. I am *prrrrrrrreeeeeeetty* drunk." I lean my head against his chest, and he helps me climb the stairs.

I almost ask him why he doesn't just carry me, but oh well. Seb couldn't carry me. Probably. He's got those cute little chicken arms. Wait, chicken legs. Chickens don't have arms. I think. I shake my head to myself. I'm seriously fucked up, aren't I?

"What's so funny?" Liam asks.

"Chicken arms."

"Alright."

I'm worried I've got blood spilled all over the carpet, but I think my shirt caught most of it. That's good. My mom can get blood out of anything. She's a very talented laundry person. It's like Forrest Gump with ping pong. That's my mom with blood and laundry.

Liam sits me down on the edge of Elana Doorsey's parent's bathtub. "Here," he says, "don't fall back, or you'll hit your head."

"Smaaaart."

He rifles around the cabinet beneath the sink and pulls out a roll of paper towels, then rips off a handful and wets them under the sink. I slump against the wall and remind myself not to fall over. I'm so glad Liam is here to take care of me.

"Here, let's get you cleaned up," he says. Our eyes meet. His gaze is so piercing, whereas I can barely keep my eyes open. "Damn, Evan got you good, huh?"

He's surprisingly gentle while he wipes the blood off my face, choosing soft little dabs instead of hard, forceful smears like I figured he'd use. It's so light, it almost tickles.

"It's all crusty around your nostrils," he mutters, more to himself than anyone else. And it's sweet. I like Liam when he's sweet. I can't believe I wanted to avoid him tonight.

"Did it stop bleeding?" I ask.

"Mm."

"Cool."

His thumb brushes my forehead. I took the Band-Aid off, but the cut from yesterday is obviously fresh. "What happened here?" he asks, staring at the mark.

I look behind his shoulder to the sink. "Seb almost crashed his truck. It worked out though."

"Seb?" His fingers are soft against the cut, and I can only feel the tenderness of his cut. I look back to him, right as his nose wrinkles. I see double of him for a moment, but when I blink, the blurrier version of him disappears. "Sebastian Krause took you home last night?"

"Yeah."

Liam exhales through his nose and pushes his hair away from his forehead. He's super sweaty, I realize. Ew. But same. "He's so

weird," Liam says.

"He's super nice," I insist, then burp. Damn. "I like him. He's cool. We're, we're friends now, actually."

"Be fuckin' for real."

"Uhh, huh, yeah, I'm for real."

Liam shakes his head. "You don't want to be with someone like that. He's practically scared of his own shadow, from what Evan told me. You like someone who's firm and adventurous, right? That's what you told *me*."

"Um, sometimes? But, I like Sebastian. He's sweet. He listens."

"Hmph." He grabs some fresh paper towels and wets them. "Do I not listen to you?"

Fuck, I'm hurting his feelings. I'm hurting his feelings *when* he's being nice too. I'm the worst. "You do listen to me," I promise. "Don't worry. I like you too."

"I'm not worried about that." He tilts my chin up. I suck in a breath when the suddenly freezing cold paper towels touch my neck. It wasn't this cold before. Liam's movements are rougher now too, scrubbing the blood away from my jugular.

"Liam," I choke out, "be gentle?"

He leans in and presses an equally frigid kiss right beneath my jaw. "Don't worry," he whispers. "Aren't I always?"

He drops the paper towels on the floor and grabs my hair with his hand, pulling my head back to have full access to my neck. My hands scrabble at his shoulders, trying to shove him away, but I don't have the strength.

"Liam, please, I don't want to."

Liam sighs and just tightens his grip. I gasp. Tears prick the corners of my eyes. "Come on," he whispers. "You'll fuck Sebastian Krause,

but not me? I thought you were mine."

"We're not even together," I whisper, wishing I had long nails to dig into his shoulders. Anything to make him realize what he's doing. Not here, not in this house. Not again. *Not again.*

"Shh, stop talking." He licks the side of my throat, then sucks on it, biting down with his front teeth. I let out a cry of pain, swaying slightly. His other arm wraps around my lower back, keeping me sitting straight. "You're okay."

No. "Liam." Not again.

"Do you want to use the bed?" he asks. His eyes glint with something dark, something dangerous, something wrong. "Or the tub?"

"I don't wanna use anything," I tell him, a tear trickling down my cheek. My head is spinning. I'm going to throw up. Definitely. "I don't feel good. Take me home. Please."

"We *could* go to your place," Liam muses, standing and walking to the sink once more. He washes his hands, then watches his own reflection as he uses his wet palms to brush back his hair. His eyes flick over to me, cruel, cold. "But I don't know, it sounds kind of hot to use Mr. and Mrs. Doorsey's room, doesn't it?"

This is where I should be shouting for help. Or fighting him off. I'm shorter than Liam, but I'm stronger. I need to do something, but I just, I can't. This can't be happening. I can't cause a scene—I *won't*—over something that's not a big deal. I'm overreacting. I have to be. Aren't I always?

And then, there's this thought, this awful little thought: if I don't want this, wouldn't I be fighting harder?

"Come on," Liam says, crouching in front of the tub again. I don't want this. My hands slap weakly against his shoulders. "I've missed you."

"Liam, no," I whisper. "Stop."

My stomach bubbles up. Acid burns my throat. I'm totally going to throw up, oh my god.

"What the actual fuck?"

I don't register whose voice it is until I see an elbow connect with the side of Liam's skull. He all but flies to the side, landing on the floor in a heap.

Saanvi breathes heavily, massaging her elbow. "Holy shit," she says. "Holy shit. I–I—for the record, I do *not* condone violence. Holy, holy shit."

Liam groans, rubbing his head. "What the *fuck*?"

He starts to push himself up off the floor, and Saanvi—zero hesitation—kicks at the back of his elbow. She kicks *hard*. There's a loud *crack* and he screams, falling to the ground and clutching his elbow.

"Fuck you," she spits. "Fucking *asshole*. Fuck. You. Fuck. Fuck. Come on, Harrison."

My hand is on my head. I'm breathing heavily, trying to calm down while simultaneously attempting to psych myself up to stand. I'm actually going to throw up if I stand. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Saanvi shouts out the bathroom door, "SEBASTIAN KRAUSE, GET YOUR ASS IN HERE!" Behind her, Liam is still whimpering about his elbow. She turns to him, glaring. "Fuck. You. Fucking pig. I should call the cops on your fucking ass."

"Saanvi," I mutter, trying to stand.

"Fuck, fuck, here."

She slides an arm under mine and tries to hold me straight, placing her other hand on my chest in an attempt to push me upright. "Are you okay?" She gasps. "Did he hit you?"

"No, no." I shake my head, eyes closed tight. "Evan."

"Oh my god, it's assholes on parade tonight. Come on, let's get you back to your house."

I take one step and can't fight it anymore. I turn my head to the side and vomit onto Liam—watery, burning vomit that's a mix of just about every drink I had tonight. All over his head and shoulders. And it's not a quick little vomit either. It's like a waterfall of projectile vomit.

"Oh wow," Saanvi says. "Nice one."

I wipe my mouth, then burp. Fuck, my mouth tastes nasty. "Thanks."

A/N - so like ... heavier chapter????

chapter sixteen

[image]

Sebastian

"What the hell did I miss?" I ask Saanvi. She's in the upstairs hallway, and Harris is slumped against her, an absolute mess of a man. And that's not hyperbole. There's blood splattered all over the front of his shirt, and small bruises are forming beneath his eyes, and the wet sheen on his chin just might be vomit.

"I'll tell you in the car," she says. Her eyes are as serious as they are hollow. She looks the angriest I've ever seen her—is it just me, or are her hands shaking?

"Here," I tell her, "I'll carry him."

"You can carry me?" he asks. He looks absolutely defeated. "Are you ... are you sure?"

"Yeah, of course." Hopefully.

"But, but, your chicken arms."

"My what?"

"We've gotta fuckin' go," Saanvi says. "If you and your chicken arms can lift him, then do it."

As I attempt to scoop Harrison up bridal style, I realize that I don't actually know how to lift someone. Also, Harris may be short, but he's stocky and strong, mostly lean muscle. I squat down and try to scoop him up like that, but he's not the most cooperative.

"It's okay," he mutters, his eyes closed. His head lolls to the side. "Your chicken arms."

"Oh my god, where is this chicken arms shit coming from?"

Someone approaches behind us on the stairs. I turn and see—much to my surprise *and* chagrin—Evan standing there, his hair disheveled, his brow furrowed.

"Is he okay?" he asks.

Saanvi takes a step forward. "You punched him in the fucking face and left him alone with Liam mother-fucking Grande. What do you think?"

Evan pales. "Wait, Liam? Did he—"

"It's none of your fucking business what he did or didn't do," Saanvi says, stepping in front of the pair of us. Evan tries to meet my gaze. I look away.

"Move." Saanvi crosses her arms in front of her chest. "Or so help me, I will kick your bony ass down those steps."

"Sebastian," Evan says, his voice strained. His gaze is pleading. "Is Harris okay?"

"I–I don't know," I mutter.

"I'm fine," Harris whispers, pressing his face into my chest. But he's so obviously not. I don't know what to do.

Evan takes a step forward. I hold Harris just a little tighter. "Let me carry him down the stairs," he offers. "It's the least I can do."

Saanvi looks back to the pair of us, frowning. I can tell she's considering it. I am, too.

"Fine," I say. Can't hurt. Well, *shouldn't* hurt. Kind of does though. "Thank you."

He walks forward and squats down, just like I'd thought to do but couldn't manage. He makes scooping Harris up in his arms look easy, despite how heavy he is. "I'm so sorry about hitting you," Evan says, adjusting his grip before walking down the stairs.

Saanvi's eyes stay narrowed, even when we're out at the truck. Evan

places Harris in the backseat, buckling him up and asking him to stay awake before looking back to me. "Hey Seb, you might wanna grab some plastic bags or something before you go."

It takes a moment to register. "Right, right." I run back inside the house, all the way to the kitchen. There's a variety of alcohol littering the island counter; people are packed into the open floor plan, drunkenly dancing under green LED lights. It's a dizzying cacophony of pure noise and inebriated nonsense.

Plastic bags, plastic bags, plastic bags. Just my luck—Elana Doorsey is leaning against the farmhouse sink, her head tossed back as she laughs.

I'm surprised when she sees me and waves. "Sebastian!" she shouts. A strap of her tank top slides off one slender shoulder. If I weren't gay, I'd probably think she was hot, some kind of dream Pinterest girl. Unfortunately, I am very gay, and also very, very panicked right now.

"Um, hi," I shout, striding right up to her. Her two friends glance at each other, then walk away. "I need some plastic bags."

It's as if she didn't hear me. "That cliff diving was *so cool*," she says, running slender fingers along my arm. It tickles in a weird way. "You should let me come with you some time. Or you could join me at Wetspring."

"Yeah, uhuh. Can I have some plastic bags?"

Elana pouts. "Aww, are you leaving?"

"Yeah. I just need plastic bags."

"Ugh, fiiine." She squats down ridiculously low to open the cabinet beneath the sink. I stare at the pile of ice in the sink, and at the pile of Trulies sitting atop it. A few Target bags in hand, Elana stands up seductively, almost like she's scooping her ass up from off the floor. I almost want to laugh, but it feels mean.

"Here you go," she says, smiling. "See you around."

It feels impossibly tight as I try to weave my way back towards the front door. Seriously, like, there's a *lot* of shoving. I'm walking out right as Evan is walking in. His expression looks downright furious. "Hey, Evan." I stick my arm out to catch him, because he doesn't seem to hear me. "Is everything good?"

His mouth opens and shuts a few times, and then he shakes himself off. "I'm gonna grab the guys and go have a talk with Liam Grande," he says. And, fuck, I hate myself for thinking this, but it's kind of hot in a weird way.

"Did Saanvi—"

"Yeah. Fucking creep. He tried to do the same to me once, but this sounds so much worse." He shakes his head, then looks up to the ceiling. "I just ... I feel terrible."

"Don't feel terrible," I say.

"No, I feel awful," he says, reaching up and rubbing his forehead, causing the smooth skin to crease. "I hit Harris for one, which is so uncool, and I was so mad that I didn't go check up on him immediately. And I left him with *Liam*."

Something he said clicks. "He tried to do the same thing to you?"

"It was in January. We were kind of talking...." His voice drops to a whisper. "That's part of why I broke up with you. I'm sorry, it just felt wrong. I was a terrible boyfriend, but I couldn't keep doing you dirty like that."

If Harris hadn't already told me that Evan and Liam had hooked up, I would have been completely blindsided. But all I can say now is, "It's okay. I know."

"You know?"

"Harrison."

He sighs. "Right. Just, I promise you, I didn't hook up with Liam while we were together. We almost did, and I felt terrible about it. And then, a few nights after I broke up with you, we were smoking

and he tried.... Well. I started dating Rachel a few weeks after."

I'm not going to think about his timeline right now. Or how my ex was talking to someone else while we were together. Really, right now, I just feel awful. Awful for Evan, sure, but *especially* awful for Harris. Sweet Harris, who always goes out of his way to make me feel comfortable and ask for my consent. Fuck. No wonder why it's so important to him.

Has this happened with him and Liam before? I'm almost scared to ask.

"I ... I've got to go," I tell Evan. The fear of having to think about it is turning into the anger of knowing.

He nods. "Same. Saanvi said Liam might need to go to urgent care, so I think me and some folks are gonna go make sure he needs to."

"Y'know what, valid. Bye, Evan."

"Bye, Seb."

I don't look back on my way out the door.

"There you fucking are," Saanvi says when I open the back door of the truck. She's sitting in the driver's seat, knuckles completely white on the wheel. A few mosquitoes buzz around the interior door light.

Harris is slumped against the opposite window. I scooch my way to the middle seat, plastic bags in hand while I buckle up. "Here, Harris," I say. "Do you need to throw up?"

"No," he grumbles, waving me off with a limp hand.

"Don't let him fall asleep," Saanvi says. "I'm pretty sure that's a rule."

"Isn't that for a concussion?"

"Jesus fucking Christ, Seb, *I don't know*. Just do it. Please." She looks at the truck's pitch black dash and holds a hand out back to me. "Keys. Give me your keys."

"You hate driving the truck," I point out.

"Shut the fuck up and please take care of your boyfriend."

I hand her my keys. "He's not my boyfriend," I mutter.

"Yeah, well, whatever." She starts the truck and checks the street behind us. There's not another car in sight. "Shut up and take care of your 'it's complicated' if you don't want to be cleaning puke up from off your leather seats tomorrow."

"Do you need to puke?" I ask Harris.

"No." He shakes his head slightly. And then, with no warning, a deep shudder rips out from him, and his shoulders begin to shake.

"Fuck," he whispers. "Sorry."

Hesitantly, I unbuckle and place a hand on his shoulder. "Don't be sorry," I tell him. "What do you have to be sorry for?"

"I'm–I'm a mess," he says. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"Sorry, do I turn here, or—" Saanvi starts.

"Left on Elm," I tell her. "It's 2302."

"You memorized my address," Harris says, still crying softly. Each breath from him is harsh and gasping. "You're my favorite stalker."

"You are so weird," I tell him, torn between smiling and crying myself. "Let's just get you into bed."

"Okay," he whispers. "Okay."

I keep my hand on his shoulder the whole way home. The plastic bags, thankfully, go unused.

A/N: almost half of all the chapters are up, ahhh

it's technically not friday here but it's friday somewhere

sooooo, enjoy!

chapter seventeen

[image]

Harris

My head is pounding. Like, absolutely pounding. And my throat is beyond sore—I'm sensing a likely combination of frequent vomiting and intense thirst. My blinds are half-closed, and the sunlight peeking through is way too bright to be humane. My phone is right on my nightstand, thankfully. I check the time. Right before my eyes, it goes from 3:44 to 3:45.

There's a glass of water on the nightstand too, thankfully, right next to one of the blue Post-It notes from my desk. It reads in surprisingly messy handwriting *Hey, Harris, I stayed till about 7 but had to go home, or my parents would murder me. You stopped throwing up around 3 so it wasn't too bad. Pls hydrate and call me when you're up. Hope you're okay. I'm here for you if you need anything. —Seb*

I wrack my brain, trying to recall last night. Crying. I remember a lot of crying, all while someone held me. I can't remember if it was in the back of Seb's truck or in my bed. But I think I sobered up a few hours before Seb left, at least enough to remember his arms around me, holding me tight against him like he never wanted to let go. That definitely happened.

I sit up, trying to recall other information. When I try to rub the sleep out of my eyes, I wince at how sore they are. Yep. Got punched. Forgot about that. What happened after that?

A few things come to mind, like Bachata Girl, and Saanvi cussing someone out. Liam wiping the blood off my—

Liam.

I want to throw up again, although this time, for a different reason than pure over-intoxication. Holy shit. He tried, yesterday, he tried —I can't.

Holy shit.

I scramble out of my bed, kicking the covers off myself and catching my ankle on my sheets. I trip and fall down onto the cement floor, landing uncomfortably on my wrists. My heart is hammering straight through my chest. I can't breathe.

It couldn't have been that bad. I've got to be wrong.

That's it, I'm misremembering. I stand up, brush myself off, and glance down at the floor. I'm wearing a worn white cross-country shirt, and on the floor is my yellow shirt from last night. It smells disgusting, and there's blood all over the front of it. Which, great. I'm sure my mom can get it out, but I don't think she'll enjoy me explaining that I was wounded at yet another party.

She might be able to notice though. I turn on my phone's selfie cam to see how bad the bruising under my eyes is. And, yep. It's really bad. She will definitely be noticing. Tenderly, I tap my nose and wince. It hurts like a bitch, but upon further examination, I'm pretty sure it's not broken. So, if nothing else, at least there's that.

How can I explain this one to her?

And, honestly, forget just explaining it to my mom—how do I explain this to myself? I'm unsure of what happened, but one thing I know is that it wasn't good.

Liam wiping the blood off my neck, everything feeling cold and mushy; Evan's fist lit up a sickening green by the LED lights; Saanvi yelling at—at who, at me?

Ugh. Why can't I remember?

I'm trying to sort out what I want to say when I hear the basement door open. Mom's footsteps are louder than usual, signifying she either wants to let me know she's coming down so I can make myself decent, or she's pissed. I listen to a few more footsteps to be sure.

Oh, she is *so* pissed.

"Who was that boy I caught sneaking out at seven a.m.?" she asks as she rounds the corner, then gasps when she sees my face.

"Ummmmm," I say, deciding on the lesser of two evils, "what boy?"

"Baby, what happened to your face?" She's on me in seconds, examining me, poking my nose and trying to make my eyes follow her index finger. They don't follow, but they do roll. "What on earth did you get into last night?"

"It's fine," I insist, pulling away from her. Wow, does my head hurt. Fuck. "I'm all good."

"That doesn't tell me what happened," she says, crossing her arms. All moms have a Mom Look. My mom's might be the scariest. "So. What happened?"

"Nothing! I'm serious."

"Who hit you?" she asks, her voice hard. "Was it Liam?"

"No!" But my voice catches in my throat, because suddenly, it's like I can feel his teeth on my throat. When did that happen? Why can't I remember?

"Baby," Mom says, her gaze turning to pitying.

"Stop! Just stop. It wasn't Liam. It was Evan Miller."

"Neil's kid?"

I don't know who Neil is, but it sounds about right. "Probably?" The Look intensifies. "Jesus, Mom, *yes*, okay?"

"Why did Neil's kid hit you?"

I toss my hands up in the air. "I honestly *do not* remember, mother."

"Don't call me 'mother' in a voice like that." She's pointing at me, a disarming combination of Mom Look and Mom Finger. "Seriously. Do *not* speak to me in that tone."

"Whatever. I'm sorry."

She sighs. "If you're drinking so much that you don't remember the night before, then you are drinking wayyyy too much, Harrison. I know I'm pretty lax with you, and you're an adult and all, but I'm not going to sit back and watch you behave like an idiot. Getting black out drunk and fighting Neil's kid—"

Oh my god. "Okay, Mom, who the *fuck* is Neil?"

"Don't change the subject!" It's rare she ever raises her voice to me. I instinctively recoil from her. She doesn't seem to notice, or at least care. "Harrison Duncan McCammon. You graduated high school less than two weeks ago. You can't be acting like this in your first couple weeks of freedom. Contrary to your beliefs, you are *not* an adult. You're a child who can't even pretend to be grown."

"Mom, I—"

"*I* am speaking. Now. The rules for drinking, if you were planning on being stupid and drinking in high school. Remember those? Don't drink excessively, and don't get into trouble."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

I grumble, "Yes, ma'am."

Her glare is piercing, yet simultaneously pleading. "You did both of those things last night. Seriously. Your scholarship is such a gift, Harrison, and you are absolutely prepared to blow it on some petty high school summer bullshit. Come the fuck *on*, baby. You should know better than that."

Steady breaths. There are walls in my brain, and they are closing in. I feel trapped. Like I can't breathe properly. But I don't know what to tell her. Last night was a *lot*, and I can't even remember everything.

I realize I've zoned out. "...so you're grounded until you can remember how to act like a mature human being. Comprende?"

"Grounded?" I can't believe this. I already feel shitty enough. "Mom, I'm eighteen."

"Yeah, well you know what?" She turns and starts storming back towards the steps. My mouth is agape, and shame quickly turns to simmering anger, boiling resentment. "My house, my rules. Sound good?"

"Sounds *great!"*

"Sarcasm only adds time to your sentence!" She slams the basement door behind her.

"Slamming doors is immature!"

The footsteps that have stomped halfway across the kitchen turn around and retrace their steps. She opens the door. "Fuck! You!"

My anger and frustration are at their boiling points. I can't believe this. After everything last night, this is what I get to wake up to. Now I feel like I can't even go upstairs for pain medication. "Also very mature!"

"You want mature?"

"I'd LOVE mature!"

"Fine then! I'll call Grandma to come babysit you. How's that?"

Oh, fuck my life. "Great! It sounds peachy! Grandma and I will spend the whole night playing Parcheesi and talking about how much it fucking sucks being related to you!"

"Good! Then you'll have plenty to talk about!"

She slams the door behind her once more. I don't bother to point it out this time.

A/N - omfg i have been watching so much survivor, sos okay BYE <3

chapter eighteen

sebastian

"It's fine," Saanvi says. "Believe me, this is, like, the ultimate hangover cure. He'll be so happy."

"Okay but you can't just decide that," I tell her. "Since when have you been hungover?"

She rolls her eyes, pointedly. "You don't know everything about me."

"Um, don't I?"

"Remember that time you got sick and couldn't go to that debate tournament in Marshall?"

I fake gasp. "You *didn't*."

She just snickers, and I go back to staring at Harris' front door. "Do you think he's even home?" I ask her. We've been standing out here for at least three minutes. "What if he choked on his vomit and died in his sleep and we're going to jail forever, before we burn in hell for the rest of eternity?"

"Seb," Saanvi says, side-eyeing me, "it's not that deep."

"But it *is*." I actually feel terrible about leaving him this morning, but I had no other choice. He hadn't thrown up in hours, and he'd stopped crying finally. I'd felt horrible the whole time. He was just so freaking out of it. It was awful. I've never seen someone *that* under the influence before. Beyond catching me off guard, it was more concerning than anything. When his mom caught me on my way out, I couldn't lie to her—I told her I was just making sure Harrison was okay. After a moment's hesitation, she'd simply thanked me and sent me home.

I'd texted Harrison that we were coming to bring him some treats—some cookies Saanvi and I baked this morning, and some yuja tea that Saanvi swears by, her older sister's favorite tea she told her she'd found at a boba shop near her college. "It's life-changing," she'd promised. I just hope Harris thinks so too. He hasn't seen the text, so....

"Maybe try ringing the doorbell again?" she offers. "He might just not want to see anyone right now, which is—"

The door swings open, and there's Harris, looking completely worse for wear.

"Hey," he says, nodding once.

His hair is disheveled, one side of his head looking significantly flatter than the other. His eyes are swollen up and bruised underneath, and he looks ... sleepy. I notice that he hasn't changed out of the T-shirt we changed him into when we got back last night, or how he's in the same flannel pants. His eyes are puffy and red, and I have to shove down the urge to give him a tight hug.

"Hey," Saanvi says, her voice full of pity so obvious that I wince inwardly, "are you doing okay?"

Harris blinks. There's no Band-Aid on his forehead anymore, but the bruises beneath his eyes are dark blueish-purple, already yellowing slightly on the far edges of his cheekbones. "I'm ... I'm all good. Why?"

I don't know what to say to that. Neither does Saanvi. "Do you remember much of last night?" I offer, because I don't know what else to say. "A lot went down. We just wanna make sure you're okay."

He waves me off, maybe too quickly. "I'm completely fine, don't worry."

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive," he says.

I'm having trouble wrapping my brain around this, him being "completely fine." Last night, I was here almost the entire night, holding him and soothing him while he kept throwing up water and dry pieces of toast. "And you remember everything?"

"Why wouldn't I?" He tries to give me a reassuring smile. My heart pangs as I realize, for the first time, that Harrison is a god-awful liar.

"We bring nectar and ambrosia," Saanvi says, holding up the tiny pink mesh bag full of the mint-chocolate chip cookies we made along with the travel thermos of yuja-cha. "Perfect hangover cures. In case you're, y'know, hungover. After last night. Because ... yeah. It'll do just the trick."

"Or so she claims," I tell him, trying to smile.

He smiles back, then seems to remember himself and steps aside, inviting us in with a sweeping arm. "You can play Parcheesi with me and Grandma."

I'm confused at first, but when I walk in, there's a stocky old woman sitting on the couch, all wrinkled smile lines and sunspots, along with what are immediately observable as Harris' own eyes. Her knobbly legs are set on the floor before her, a long TV remote in her lap and some board game I don't recognize on the coffee table in front of her. She's wearing one of those little old lady cardigans, a pink one that somehow makes her paper-white hair seem even whiter. There's immediately something simultaneously serious and playful about her, a gruff, wisened humor that I can't quite describe.

She nods at us. It makes her jowls shake slightly. "'Sup."

Saanvi and I don't move for a second, until Harris reaches around us awkwardly to shut the front door. It snaps us out of the—surprise? Shock?—of receiving a "sup" from this seemingly *quite* elderly woman.

"How are you?" Saanvi asks, then holds out the mesh bag once more. "Cookies?"

"Well, I'm much better *now*," says Harris' grandma, reaching out for the bag. "Now, I've got three asses to kick at Parcheesi instead of just one. Care to introduce us, duckie?"

"This is Sebastian Krause, and this is Saanvi Gaddam," Harris says, still seemingly trying to wipe the sleep from his eyes. "We all just graduated."

"And I take it they're not friends with that Liam boy?"

Harris shakes his head, his lips drawing into a tight line. Does he remember? Does she know? I feel like he doesn't. "Nope."

"Alright then. You can call me Granny Mac." She rotates the board game in front of her. It almost looks like Sorry, but bigger, and likely more convoluted. "I'm green."

"Oh, I have to be red," Saanvi says, making herself at home and sitting on the couch next to Granny Mac. "I'll fight both of you for it."

Harris sits on the edge of the coffee table right by his grandmother, reaching out to grab the yellow pieces for himself. His shirt from last night, the splatter of crimson stains against the dandelion, comes to mind unbeckoned. "No complaints from me. I'll be nice to Seb since his favorite color is so obviously blue."

Favorite colors don't matter to me. Like, to me, knowing someone's favorite color doesn't mean you know them, just like knowing their middle name or hair color wouldn't mean we were best friends. But somehow, Harris noticed that I love blue. Either I make it really obvious, or he just cares enough to notice.

I don't know why that touches me as much as it does.

I feel his eyes on me as I sit down on the side of the table across from his grandma. "He's not wrong," I say, smiling at him. He manages an easy smile back. He really is sweet, I decide. Which makes me feel even more terrible about everything last night, something I didn't think was even possible. I have a feeling I'm going to end up having to repeat last night's events to him. I'm not

looking forward to it.

Parcheesi flies by fast. It confirms the validity behind Harris' story from Paco's—his grandmother *definitely* has told him not to be a little pussy. She speaks like a sailor. Even worse, probably.

"I'm gonna have to do it, Gam Gams," Saanvi says, one of her two red pieces on the board hovering over Granny Mac's last green piece. It's two spots outside of her safe space, and if she were to get it in, she'd win. "Don't worry, I'll win for the both of us."

"You fucking motherfucker," Granny Mac seethes, arms crossed tightly across her chest. Her face is red. "I will fucking end you."

Saanvi and Granny Mac are two peas in a pod, surprisingly. They're both highly competitive with shrewish tongues, in the best way possible. They've been absolutely obliterating me and Harris, who doesn't play like he expects to win at all, but is instead here to be little more than an agent of chaos.

He glances at me, frowning this silly little frown with his eyebrows raised all the way up, as if he's trying to say *Sheeeeesh* without turning the shared rage of Saanvi and his grandmother all on him.

I snort. Granny Mac points at me immediately, eyes so narrow, they're passed being 'slits' and are just closed. Her wrinkles are creased deeply, skin folding into skin like some *Inception* kind of shit. "*You*. You're next."

One of my four pawns is on the spot one pace outside of her starting place. If she rolled a five and a one, I'd be scared, but there's a 1/36 chance of her getting out, so I feel like I'm sitting easy.

Harrison leans back on one arm, and our hands are suddenly inches away from each other. It's all I'm thinking about—the sheer proximity, while knowing there's no way he'll reach out to touch me. But then I feel the softness of his fingertips against my hand, and I try not to inhale too sharply.

Without looking down, I intertwine my fingers with his. The

position isn't comfortable; the heel of my palm is digging in uncomfortably to the scratchy woven rug we're sitting on, and my elbow is hyperextended. But the discomfort is easy to overlook with his hand in my own. He squeezes me once, a silent hello. I squeeze back.

"HA!" shouts Granny Mac. "A five and a one. Who's my bitch? *Sebastian* is my bitch."

A/N: another day, another slayyyy

Hope you guys enjoyed!!

chapter nineteen

[image]

Harris

A week passes, and I'm still grounded. Luckily for me though, I really enjoy hanging out with Grandma. And as an added bonus? So do Seb and Saanvi, who have been over every evening like clockwork since that first night of Parcheesi.

Mom speaks to me as little as possible, any "conversations" being had largely through Post-It notes left on the fridge and front door. I think she prefers paper messages over texting, because I can reply to text messages. Not that I have anything I want to say to her, either. I mean, what am I supposed to tell her? That I have fuzzy recollections of what happened that night, and I don't know what I can do about it? That this isn't fair, but I understand, but I'm frustrated that I can't tell her the truth, because I'm already enough of a disappointment?

"You're awfully quiet today," Grandma says between bites of gemelli pasta. I made pesto pasta for dinner, because it's easy and Grandma says that she's my prison warden, not my personal chef. Honestly, valid. Normally at this time of day, I cook for Mom too, so I'm used to it.

"Just thinking," I tell her. We're on the first episode of *Dexter*, because she and I both think it's melodramatic, our favorite kind of thing to mock.

"That's new."

On screen, Dexter stares into an empty box of donuts and says via voice over, "Just like me: empty inside." That elicits a solid laugh from both of us. I finish my pasta and set the bowl on the coffee table, eager to do anything but talk—anything to avoid serious conversation.

After a few minutes of silence, Grandma sighs and reaches out with the remote in hand to turn down the TV. "Are you okay, duckie?"

"I'm fine, Grandma. Don't worry about it."

She sighs. I keep my focus on the TV, but my skin begins to crawl, the anxiety that accompanies anticipating a conversation. "What happened at that party, Harrison?"

"Nothing," I insist, hating how whiny it comes out. "Don't worry, I'm fine."

"You're not fine." Her voice is sharp. "You've been acting strange, and if you don't tell me what's wrong, I'm going to make you suffer emotionally, physically, and spiritually."

My grandmother has very interesting approaches to normally sensitive topics. The threat may be empty ... or she could legitimately be planning on making me suffer. Either way, I'd rather not give everything away. It feels like too much of a risk. Mom and Grandma have this way of extracting information from me, and I'm a god-awful liar anyways.

Still. Maybe a little bit wouldn't hurt.

"I got really drunk," I tell her, still hesitant, "and kind of got into a fight with another guy from the track team."

"What was the fight about?" she asks. When I don't answer, she adds, "Was it a boy?"

"No," I tell her. It's a lie, of course. I can vaguely remember asking him why he cheated on Seb. The fact that I asked that, when it's hardly my business, is one thing. Asking it in front of all those people was just straight-up disrespectful. I fucking *outed* him. I feel terrible. I've been wanting to reach out to apologize, but I haven't been able to muster up the courage yet.

"You're a terrible liar."

I'm so tired of this already. "Grandma, I—"

"Is it Sebastian?"

I stay silent.

"Okay," she says, nodding. "I can't say I disprove. He's a cutie."

This time, I groan. "Grandma, I—"

"Shut up," she says. "Just, shut up. Don't be a little asshole."

"Sorry."

"So who was the other man?" she asks, leaning in and whispering, as if I'm giving her hot gossip in the middle of a crowded room.

"He's not really the *other man*—"

"Harrison. Quit being useless. You know better."

"Jesus, woman, fine. Evan Miller. You don't know him."

Grandma scrunches up her face to glare at me, her wrinkles deepening as she frowns. "What do you mean, I don't know him? Neil's son."

Not her, too. "Oh my god, I can't. Who the *fuck* is Neil?"

"He works with your mother. But this isn't about Neil. Don't make this about Neil."

"But I feel like it should be. How do you and Mom know him?"

Grandma swats my arm. "Stop trying to change the subject."

I hold my hands up in mock surrender. "Fine, fine, I yield. We ... we only fought because he cheated on Seb a while back. They were dating in secret—Grandma, you can't tell anyone, neither of them are out."

"Ally till I die," Grandma says, raising her hand up and placing the other atop her heart. "Which, with any luck, will be any day now."

I roll my eyes. "Anyways, yeah. I was super drunk, and I asked him

why he cheated on him, and next thing I know, there's a fist in my face and I'm bleeding all over."

"Yeeeesh," says Grandma. "You just let him clock you like that? Pussy."

"Grandma! I was drunk as fuck."

"So? I broke my hand once in a bar fight, and I was so drunk that I could barely remember it the next day."

"You were in a bar fight?" Nothing she says surprises me anymore. Nothing at all.

"Yeah, this asshole said, 'If you were a man, I'd meet you outside,' and all I know is, I said, 'If you were a man, I'd go.' Honestly, what a little bitch. Worth it."

I shake my head. "You're something else."

"Yeah, that'll be you next if you don't tell me the rest of what happened."

"Nothing else happened!" I insist. My voice is so strained, I can feel the painful tightness in my throat. It travels down to my chest, seeping into my ribcage and constricting so that my aching organs press against it.

Grandma turns the TV off completely and turns to me. Her sparse eyebrows are unruly, the white, wiry hairs curling around in different directions. I focus on those instead of making actual eye contact. It's easier that way.

"Harrison," she says. There's a softness to her voice that I don't often hear. "You can tell me. What happened?"

"Nothing." I'm going to cry. I don't remember the last time I cried. Aside from that night, of course.

"Harrison—" The doorbell rings.

"I'll get it," I say and launch myself toward the door. Saanvi and Seb

are a little earlier than they said they'd be, but I don't mind it. Really, this is the perfect time—

"Hey," Liam says, one hand in his pocket. His right arm is in a cast, a new look for him. I see a few signatures scrabbled in black Sharpie. There's a stiff-looking bandage on his nose too. Did he break it somehow? Was this all from that night? I can't breathe. "Can we talk?"

Fuck. I feel like I'm going to throw up. I don't know why, I just do.

"Sorry," I tell him, "but now isn't a good time."

As if he doesn't hear me, Liam takes a step closer to the door. A step closer to me. Fuck. Fuck. No. Fuck. I have to force myself to stay still, to not take a step back like my body is screaming at me to do. It's like I feel his teeth on my throat all over again, his fingers furled in the back of my hair, yanking my head back. Something I hadn't recalled in such vivid detail till just now. I want to throw up, *again*.

"It'll be quick, I promise." His voice is quiet, too quiet. Too soft. Too sweet. Why is he standing so close? He shouldn't be that close. I want to tell him to stop, to leave, to get out, but I'm at a loss. "I wanted to apologize."

There's a shuffling behind me. "Apologize for what?" comes Grandma's voice. She stands next to me in the open doorway, her eyes squinted like she's trying to figure out just what she's looking at. "Is this that Liam boy I've heard so much about?"

Grandma definitely knows it's him. She's met Liam before, plenty of times. But there's something on her voice this time, an unveiled threat of sorts. Like Mom, she's always hated him, but she plays nice (by *her* standards). The sudden change in Grandma's attitude is puzzling, even amongst the sudden anxiety I feel. I can't quite figure it out, but I'm sure my inexplicable reaction to him showing up hasn't helped any.

Liam visibly pales, his expression going slack before he quickly recovers. "Sorry, Granny Mac—"

"Mrs. McCammon," Grandma corrects coolly.

He blinks. "Right. *Mrs. McCammon*. I just wanted to have a quick word with Harrison here about the other night. We won't be long, don't worry. I won't take up too much of his time."

"Unfortunately, you won't be taking up *any* of his time," says Grandma. "Harrison is grounded, and I don't feel like having to babysit any potentially *unruly* guests. Try again another time. Now, you have a good night, Liam."

"Wait, Harris, real' quick, I—"

She shuts the door in his face. And then she locks it, for good measure.

"That boy is trouble," she mutters. Then she glances back at me, and there's a different kind of concern in her eyes. "But you already know that, don't you?"

"Grandma, nothing happened," I insist.

"Didn't say anything did." She purses her lips. "Let's ... let's watch a different show. Something light and fluffy, how about that? Something with less murder. I know, how about that *Poker Face* show your mama told me about?"

"Uh, it's all about murder, Grandma."

"Oh, pshaw," she says, waving her hand. "I'm just sick of having to look at cut up prostitutes."

"Very fair," I tell her, ignoring some of that tight-yet-hollow feeling in my chest. I can't believe he showed up here like that. Really, beyond anything else, it makes me feel unsafe. But I can't say that, especially to Grandma. I'm sure she suspects what happened, maybe even beyond what I myself remember. I mean, why else would she have turned him away like that? Still, I can't talk to her about this. I won't.

I need to know what all went down that night. Even if it's scary.

I'll just have to talk to Seb. When I can get up the courage, that is.

A/N - what's up, party people??

chapter twenty

[image]

sebastian

I've begun packing for fall semester already, because knowing me, I'm going to procrastinate till the very end of the summer and then wind up in a panic. But if I get it done now, then that's one thing off my mind, and all the more free I'll be as the summer winds to an end. I'm not making it easy for myself; I'm playing all the old songs my parents and I used to listen to when I was a kid, stuff like "Crayon Angels" by Judee Sill. I'm folding up the green Blues-Clues-looking-ass sweater when my dad comes and leans against my door frame.

"Getting a head start?" he asks, nodding at the half-filled suitcase lying open on my bed. He's wearing his typical dad summer wear, khakis and a polo, a red ball cap on his head that barely contains his curls. I've never been able to wear a cap. I'm surprised he has the audacity to try. I'm less surprised to see the slogan he's proudly worn around town since 2016: *Make America Great Again*. Sure.

"Yeah." I fold the sweater and roll it into a little log. Saves space. Things you learn when you go on overnight trips for school all the time. "Just so I don't have to worry about it later."

"Smart."

"Thanks."

He watches me in silence. Anticipation crawls up the back of my neck, but I try not to let it get to me. I don't know why he's here, but I feel like I'm going to get interrogated. Usually, Dad and I are chill, but outside of being father and son, I'm not convinced that we really like each other all too much. Finally, unable to take it any longer, I ask him, "What's up?"

He seems surprised I asked, but recovers quickly. Unlike me and Mom, Dad and I are fairly all business, no play. Just right straight to the fact. "Are you...." He clears his throat. Phlegmy. Gross. "Are you seeing someone?"

I force myself to focus on the suitcase. The less eye contact, the better. Maybe. Or not at all. I don't know, I'm kind of panicking.

They say that in an interrogation, you want to stick as close to the truth as possible. And the truth here is that Harris and I aren't so much 'seeing each other' as we're briefly fooling around, engaged in a not-technically-monogamous friendship. So it doesn't feel like a lie when I tell my dad, "Nope. Still single as ever."

"You're not with Saanvi yet?" Dad asks. He pronounces her name wrong, always has—more like 'ann' than 'ahn.' Maybe it's a northern Minnesota accent thing. She's never corrected him, claiming that she doesn't care, so I stopped correcting him myself. It's not my name, and goodness knows she feels comfortable enough with my parents to tell them herself—she's told them plenty of other things. (Although thinking back to The Great Toilet Paper Debacle makes me beyond nervous; that shit gave me borderline-PTSD, I swear.)

Still, there's a reason we do our best to be here only when my parents are gone. Just because Saanvi is confident enough to not back down in the face of my parents doesn't mean that either of us necessarily feel safe here. It's not as if Saanvi can hide her first-generation Indian-American Brownness when she's here. And, as shitty as it is, it's certainly easier for me to be less myself when she's not around; I can hide when it's just me and I can neatly tuck and fold away every loose edge that doesn't work with my conservative parents' image of a perfect son. I can shrink inside myself.

I'm safe at home so long as I'm not *too much* myself.

I give him a look, picking up another shirt to fold. "We're not going to get together, Dad."

"Right, sure." He sighs. I know, I'm just *such* a disappointment. Boo hoo. So sad. Why even *have* a girl best friend if you're not going to play grab-ass with her? "Have fun packing, kiddo. Mom and I have

book club this evening, so don't get into too much mischief."

"I thought book club was at, like, three."

"That's the Maple Grove Coffee book club," he says, like this should be obvious. Maybe it is, and my powers of Not Caring™ have grown *this* powerful. Good for me. "This is the one at West Denton Beanery."

"Oh." Well, at least now I don't have to feel bad about never knowing which one has the book club. I guess they both do. "What was the book?"

Dad shrugs. "'Messy Book People' or something, by Someone Patrick. I don't actually read the books—your mom does, and then gossips with me about the plots. I'm just in it for the coffee. Oh, West Denton Beanery does have really nice wine slushies though."

"Sounds about right for a Tuesday night," I say, instead of *Wine slushies? I dunno, sounds kinda GAY to me, Dad.*

"Yep." He's already walking away, headed down the stairs. "There's pizza on the counter. Don't add to the population while we're gone. Text us where you are if you go somewhere!" He's already at the bottom of the stairs when he stops shouting up to me and begins chatting with Mom, their voices soft and low. I catch a glimpse of my dad hissing, "*No he'd never.... not right....*" and decide that eavesdropping isn't worth it. I don't want to know what they have to discuss that quietly.

I turn back to my suitcase. It had felt like I'd been making progress before. Now, I'm looking at the mess in front of me—the assortment of clothes I wanted to get out of the way hastily strewn about my bed, the rolled green shirt in my hand, the mostly empty suitcase itself—and I have to wonder just what I'm doing here. Not just packing. Leaving, I guess. Maybe it's this summer, and everything with Harris, or maybe it's simply the fact that I'm still burnt out from senior year. But, I don't know how much I'm *actually* looking forward to college.

I don't like that realization at all.

I shove the shirt in my hand against the few that I'd packed before it. Just a few months ago, I'd been so looking forward to *finally* getting out of West Denton and living how I want to. Do what I want to, be who I want to be with without worrying about judgement from my family or peers. Be my own person. Finally have the freedom to figure out just who that person even is.

Now, though, it's all wrong. I think I might be terrified of moving? Something I never thought I'd say. Although it has plenty of drawbacks, there is a perk of living in Denton—it's impossible *not* to understand it. Maybe everyone feels that way about where they come from. Or maybe it mostly applies to people from small towns, the ones where you know your entire graduating class, and Main Street is only three blocks long. For better or worse, I know West Denton. Having to work to understand somewhere else is a learning curve I'm not looking forward to.

I don't know if I'll talk to Saanvi about this. She's been preparing to go to college since we were little kids. It started off with tall-order parental expectations, leading into the idolization of Rory Gilmore, closely followed by the high of academic validation. She used to send me dorm move-in vlogs, so long ago that we were using Google Hangouts for our one hour on electronic devices, because we were "too young" for phones. I feel like being nervous for college is one thing that she wouldn't get.

To be fair, I didn't expect she'd have understood the whole Harris thing, but she's been incredibly receptive. Honestly, I'm thankful. The two of them get along better than I had hoped for. What more could I ask? All this college anxiety is nothing in the grand scheme of things. I think.

Also, Harrison has actually been great for me, I'm finding. Saanvi and I go to his house like every night to play board games or watch movies with him and Granny Mac. Last night, she made us watch *I Am Legend*, because it's "culture," supposedly. Somehow, the kooky old lady has become an integral facet of our hangouts. It's all good. Really, it's all fantastic.

After the party, I've been trying to be more careful around him. I'm not going to bring up that night until he's ready to, but it makes it

difficult to know how okay he's going to be with anything. I've resigned myself to follow his lead no matter what, because he deserves that—the bare minimum, really. I'll be okay with whatever he wants to do.

The bare minimum. I can't believe Liam couldn't even give him *the bare-fucking minimum*. I hate him, I really do. I just can't let myself be like that. Ever. Harris is safe with me—he deserves to be safe with anyone. Just like he makes me feel safe with him.

I toss some pajamas into the suitcase and zip it up. I can't look at this right now.

a/n - i hate calculus <3

OKAY BYE SEE YOU TUESDAY innit

chapter twenty-one

[image]

harris

Sebastian and Saanvi leave after a couple movies and a few games of Parcheesi that felt less competitive than usual. I didn't have the energy to stir up my usual trouble, I guess. Probably why things felt so boring. And maybe a little tense.

I feel twice as terrible than I normally would have, though, simply because I was off. Grandma noticed, Saanvi noticed, and Seb? Seb *noticed*. He couldn't keep his eyes off me the whole time, and it wasn't in a cute or hot or *yayyy* way. He was concerned. So concerned, he kept moving game pieces that weren't his, and kept not hearing when Saanvi and Grandma would try to correct or cajole him.

I heard them all in the bathroom too. I wanted to go catch my breath, and so there I am in Mom's bathroom, focusing on the little pink and yellow tiles we grouted together right before middle school started. Sitting on the toilet with my pants still up, my head in my hands, clutching my hair with fists. Trying to breathe. I just wanted to breathe.

Nothing happened. Nothing happened. Nothing happened.

Get the fuck over yourself, Harris.

Nothing. Happened.

Quit overreacting.

Nothing.

Happened.

"He's out of it tonight, huh?" Saanvi says. She's met with a moment of weighted silence.

Then Grandma says, "Yeah. That Liam boy dropped by earlier. You kids wouldn't happen to know if anything happened between them, would you?"

Another beat of heavy silence, then Seb says, "I ... no. I don't think so."

I left the bathroom pretty quickly. Just to be safe.

And now, they're gone, and Grandma's asleep in the guest room, and I'm tucked into my own bed, still in my pajamas despite the intense layering of blankets going on atop my usual duvet. I'm usually a pretty hot sleeper, but right now, I can't seem to get warm.

The hairs on my arms are raised. Goosebumps have popped up along my skin. I'm sweaty, yes, but this is just ... not the shit. Something is off. I don't know what it is.

It'll be quick, I promise.

Liam.

Maybe ... maybe that's it.

I roll over onto my other side. I want to know what happened that night, in a very, very small way. Everything is a blur. I think I could recall more the morning after than I can now—and even *that* hadn't been much. It feels like watching things in double speed and slow-mo all at once, the frames of reality meshing and blurring together to the point that I'm not sure anything is real. Sound doesn't sync up, things are fuzzy, and all I can really remember is the harsh burning of some kind of strawberry drink at the back of my throat. That, and the weird bulging feeling in my chest as I tried my best not to throw up.

I almost want to ask Seb exactly *what* happened that night. I could ask Saanvi too, but we're not as close yet. I like her for sure—definitely a lot more than Liam—but there's something about Seb that makes me trust him intrinsically. Even if Saanvi would probably be a little bit more blunt with what went down at Elana

Doorsey's party, Seb wouldn't hide anything from me. And he'd be gentle. Sweet.

Not that I think there's much to tell. Or much to want to know, rather.

My phone is at two percent—I'm too lazy to plug it in right now—but I can see a multitude of missed texts from Evan ... and Liam. I decide I'll respond to Evan's later. I'm a little scared to open Liam's.

I can't really afford to *not* though, can I?

Liam : hey
Liam : things got weird the other nite, im sorry
Liam : can we pls talk

'Things got weird the other nite.' *'Things got* weird *the other nite?'* Is that it? Is that seriously all I get? It feels like my intestines are grinding against each other. It's such a Liam text. Why does it make me so vehemently uncomfortable?

Another text comes through. And then another. And I swear, my heart stops beating.

Liam : i know i overstepped again n im srry
Liam : im here, open ur window

I shut off my phone immediately and roll away from the window, squinting my eyes shut and bracing myself to hear Liam's knocking.

Usually, when he shows up to my window this late uninvited, it's to try and get me to do something stupid, like swim in the quarry or sleep with me. He's always fucked up on something. I never do anything with him when he's like that. It's basic human decency. But the more I'm thinking about the few things I can remember from 'the other *nite*'—Liam's teeth on my neck; the violent burning of vomit in my throat; his fingers too rough and too cold against my skin—the more I'm wondering how much that basic human decency is reciprocal.

There's a part of me that's saying I'm wrong. There's another part that's screaming I'm right. I'm just here, paralyzed in bed. Waiting

for the knock. I don't care which part is right—Liam is *not* coming inside right now.

I, just. I can't.

My breaths are so short, so shallow, that I'm not even sure if I'm breathing at all. My chest and my stomach are both squeezing inwards, pushing all the oxygen out of my body. I'm laying down, but I'm dizzy. My jaw is so tight, there's a tense, stinging buzz in my temples.

I've almost managed to convince myself that Liam never *actually* sent me that text, that he's not *really* here crouched in my window well, that I've made it all up because I've been out of it and nothing is really wrong, because I'm crazy and it's all in my head.

But then, he knocks. Raps his knuckles lightly against my window, faint and delicate and barely there. So soft, I'm quick to convince myself I heard nothing. Nothing. Nothing. I hear *nothing*.

But then, there it is again, a minute later. More insistent now. Maybe a little more impatient. I squint my eyes shut harder. He'll go away. If I don't respond, he'll go away.

There's silence.

He's gone. He has to be. I sigh through my nose and try to relax. It's okay. He got bored and left, and I'm alone. I'm okay. It's okay.

But then.

A hard knock, rapid and frustrated and too loud for this time of the night. My phone screen lights up with a little buzz—definitely a text from him telling me to open the window. To let him in. So we can talk.

But ... I'm scared.

I'm scared of him. Since when have I been scared of Liam? Not uncomfortable, not wary, not concerned or scared for. Scared *of*.

I don't know how long it takes to make myself move, but when I

finally do, it's to grab my phone and toss all my blankets on the floor, on the side of my bed hidden from the window. My bed frame is too shallow for me to sleep comfortably beneath it, but the concrete floor is cool to the touch, and I don't mind it once I hastily fan my blanket out overtop it. I pull my thin duvet over me and fluff my pillow, then slide my arm beneath it, pressing it tight against the side of my head with my shoulder.

Then I unlock my phone—ignoring a gut-tumbling amount of new texts from Liam—and block his number. I follow it up immediately with his Snap, then his Instagram.

You just need a break, I tell myself, turning my phone face-down on the concrete floor and shutting my eyes once more. *A Liam break. That's all.*

I wish Sebastian were here. I don't remember much from that night, but I do remember how he held me till I fell asleep. The chilly tips of his fingers brushing my hair away from my forehead, his touch so gentle that I must have I melted into him. We laid there, face to face, his nose close to mine but angled slightly above, so that I could feel every warm exhale. Our knees touched, which was somehow quite comforting, and I could have sworn he smelled different than usual. Cologne or something. I liked it.

I wish he was here to hold me like that again.

There's more knocking on the window. I don't know how long it goes on for. It's angry, though, that's for sure. He must have realized that I've blocked him on everything.

I lay there on the floor with my eyes shut tight, my covers pulled up to my chin, the chill of the concrete floor seeping through my blanket. After a while, the knocking all blurs together, one big endless loop that's suddenly more like white noise than a threat. I'm not even sure if it stops before I fall asleep, or if I'm only able to drift off in relative peace because Liam grew tired of my lack of response and left. I don't know.

All I do know is that the tension leaves my shoulders, the goosebumps dissipate, and I drift off, dreaming of Sebastian's warm

breath and chilly fingertips and comforting knees.

chapter twenty-two

[image]

sebastian

Dinner is store-bought lasagna. I wish it was the kind with marinara, but this creamy vegetable stuff is alright, I suppose.

Mom dishes it up in silence. Dad is in one of his moods again; her response is always a prompt full-system shut-down. Generally, it's effective. I follow her lead: don't speak unless spoken to, nod at the stupid shit he says (let's go, Brandon), and laugh when appropriate (even if it's not really appropriate).

I've never completely understood why we react this way to Dad's incredibly incorrect extremism. I've seen the books Mom reads. Even if she's not super left-wing, she's not Mr. QAnon over here. She read her kindergarteners the book about the gay penguin dads, for Christ's sake. And she read *All Boys Are Blue*. Everything by Nic Stone, everything by Elizabeth Acevedo, everything by Mason Deaver. When she read *Internment* by Samira Ahmed, she made me read it immediately after her. So, I mean, like, come on. She should know better than to tolerate his bullshit.

I can't judge, though, because I also partake in the bullshit tolerating. However, I'm just out of high school, with no income and no real choice. One of us is the *adult*–adult here. And it's not me. Or Dad, for that matter.

He's taken his cap off for dinner tonight—surprisingly. He's prone to wearing hats around inside the house, something that drives Mom up the fucking wall. It's one of those petty arguments I'm sure all parents get into. Based on the way his curls are glued down to his forehead with sweat, and were obviously pressed down with a cap, I'm guessing he had it on earlier. And so I spend all of supper side-eyeing the pair of them, trying to figure out if Mommy and Daddy were fighting again.

There's not a lot of political talk from Dad, which is also surprising. Usually, moods like this call for the quoting of Tucker Carlson, the "disproving" of the benefits of hormone therapy, the mocking of "over-sensitive" leftist Twitter snowflakes. (Also the occasional—and incredibly homoerotic—hyping up of Elon Musk.) But tonight, he picks apart his Stouffer's lasagna in silent disdain.

Oh my god, they *so* got into a fight.

I want to try and poke and prod the two of them to try and get some information, but I know myself well enough to know that conversational subterfuge is not my strong suit. Any drama or conflict I could possibly hope to cause would immediately fall back onto me. So, I'm gonna say, not worth it? Yeah. Not worth it.

Still, the silence is just as awkward as it is deafening, and it's filling me with a sense of dread, just waiting to see how bad things will get.

"So...." I say, right after finishing my peas. I always eat vegetables first. Save the good stuff for last. And now, I'm halfway done with my dinner, meaning that I'll have an easy escape if things go wrong, but it won't be awkward if I stick around and stumble across any hints of inra-parental conflict. "How was book club last night?"

Dad is definitely giving me a suspicious side-eye, but he says, "Fine," all clipped and gruff and oh so manly-mannish. So. Fight definitely involved book club, then.

"It was fine," Mom agrees, too normal, too neutral.

Which all but confirms: the fight was at book club. Fuck, I have to know what went down.

"Well that's nice. What book did you guys read?"

"*Her Majesty's Royal Coven,*" Mom says, avoiding eye contact with both of us while cutting up her lasagna into little bit-sized pieces. "Juno Dawson. Not my favorite, but I enjoyed it."

"It was shit," Dad says, turning to me like *I'll* understand. "By some trans-leftist freak. Pure propaganda."

"It's just a book," Mom says, still focused on her lasagna.

"It's brainwashing. That author wrote another book, that *gay* one." *Gay* feels like a dirty word coming from Dad's mouth. I try to keep a straight face. (Literally.) "Just porn, written for children."

"Have you read the book, Joseph?" Mom asks. Oh, fuck, here we go. Mom always stays silent about Dad's politics, but she's a big-time book lover. This could be it. *Please*. After years of Dad saying the stupidest, most out-of-pocket, fascist bullshit, *please* let this be the Day of Reckoning. I want to see Mom drop a hammer on him.

"I've read reviews," Dad says. "I know enough."

"It's not porn. It's educational material. Even if we don't think it's right, some kids need that."

We don't think it's right. Great. Yep.

"It's indoctrinating those kids," he insists. "They wouldn't need it if they didn't read it."

I'm keeping my responses bitten back, tucked away in a lump in the back of my throat. I want to ask him if queer people existed before this book did, but that might earn me a smack upside the head, so I refrain, and pray that Mom finally says something.

"Sex education fails all over America. We were definitely let down," Mom says. "You remember us in high school. We were idiots, because—"

"That's not the same." He always does this. Cuts her off. Because he's Dad. "I have a right not to want to read propaganda—"

"No one is saying that you *don't*, Joseph—"

"—and I have a right to expect my children not to be exposed to that!" Color floods his cheeks. Red. Always red. Angry, hot red. I decide it's high time that I scarf down my lasagna and prepare to skedaddle. "What, would you be comfortable if Seb read that bullshit?"

"That's not my point. Seb doesn't need it." Two sets of eyes flash in my direction, just a split second. My skin crawls. Were those suspicious glances, or...? "There are kids who do. It's not our place to judge, Joseph. But I would rather they be as safe as possible."

Dad shakes his head. Sweat-matted curls peel away from his forehead and shake with him. "That kind of book doesn't belong in a public library."

Mom opens her mouth to say something, right as I get up from the dinner table, my plate cleared. Her eyes follow me, and she just ... closes up. It's like I can see invisible curtains sliding in, shrouding her face. She gives Dad a tight-lipped smile and shrugs. "Well, alright, then. I do see your point, honey."

I try not to shake my head in disgust.

By the time I step out of the kitchen, there's a big fake smile plastered on my face, as big as if not bigger than Mom's. "Is it cool if I head over to Saanvi's now?"

"Are her parents home?" Dad asks.

"Oh, Joseph, he's eighteen. Does it really matter?" Mom asks. "Don't be silly."

I see a tendon shift in Dad's jaw. "Right. Fine. Be safe. And responsible."

"It's just boardgames," I assure him. And it is. I'm only headed to Saanvi's to pick her up to go to Harris'. I've enjoyed the past couple nights of Parcheesi. Granny Mac is fun as hell, and Saanvi is my best friend so I'm obviously having a great time, and being with Harris fills me with static electricity, this bubbly happiness. Even just subtly brushing our fingertips together gives me butterflies.

Honestly, anything is better than being here. Does that make me a terrible son? Because, if so, then fine. I'm the World's Worst Son. Sue me.

"Saanvi can come over sometime, you know," Mom says. "I miss my future daughter-in-law."

"Riiight," I say. "That's *definitely* happening."

"Jesus. Don't sass your mother," Dad says. He's already turned back to his lasagna. I don't think he really cares, he just likes getting to say something semi-dickish so he can feel some euphoric rush of douchebag energy.

Still, I'm sure to apologize before leaving. I don't need to give him a reason to lash out at me, because that? That's never fun.

I don't know what I was thinking earlier. I can't wait till college.

chapter twenty-three

[image]

harris

Yet another week passes before Mom deigns to unground me. By this time, we're in mid-June, and the summer weather is here in full-swing. It's raining today, and hard at that; one of those warm summer rains that seems unprecedented, the kind where the sky goes from clear and blue to dark and grey, where the heavens seem to just open up and flood the streets, maybe peoples' basements if they're really unlucky.

Mom has a couple days off, so she's driving to Minneapolis to do some shopping. "You can be ungrounded," she says on her way out the door, rolling suitcase in tow, "but I really don't feel like sitting in a car with you for three hours. Don't wait up."

I'm sure her reasoning behind ungrounding me now is because she figures I'll use her being gone to misbehave anyways. She's always been like that—you don't have to put effort into delivering and enforcing punishments if you make it difficult for someone to commit a punishable offense. As a kid, I never wanted to stress her out, so it worked until about high school.

I do feel terrible about disappointing her, I really do. But I'm trying not to feel terrible about anything that happened that night. The only thing that I could have done better was drinking responsibly. So I've decided I'm just going to avoid parties, at least for a little while. Drinking, too. I haven't told her this, because she'll think I'm sucking up or something, but it's probably for the best. Instead, I'll be focusing on preparing for the next track season, and on Sebastian.

Things have been progressing between the two of us. We're ramping up to a place of intimacy I know he hasn't explored before, but I think I'm the only one who's nervous. It's not the Liam thing, I don't

think. I just want him to have a good time, as good of a one as I have with him.

Seb : I'm so bummed, I really wanted to go to the quarry again :////

Me : I mean, forget the cliff, we could always go swimming...

Seb : Swimming in Wetspring Quarry sounds gross, no thanks

Seb : Remember the sign that says "There's dead things and poop in here"??????? No thanks.

Me : What you don't want to bathe in poop water with me while we risk being struck by lightning?

Me : I see how it is

Me : Hater

Seb : Yes, I hate you.

Me : It's because I'm gay, isn't it

It's been a while since we made out. The past week or so ended up crazy, what with the whole party thing, but just hanging out with him and stealing small moments of intimacy—small kisses goodbye; lacing our fingers together while watching movies on the couch or playing board games; etc.—have been more than enough.

We had planned to go get frisky on the cliff again, but this time by starlight—Grandma was going to vouch for me before the un-grounding, because she's just the freaking best. But this storm isn't supposed to stop for quite some time, so I don't think the cliff will be an option tonight, unfortunately. However, I do have a slightly better, less bug-ridden option.

I call Seb, and he picks up on the second ring. "What's up?" he asks. Even his voice soothes me somehow.

"What if I told you you could come over like, right now," I tell him, "and we could get up to whateeever you'd like, with the added bonus of being as loud as you'd like, because my mom is gone."

"Your mom is gone? Where is she?"

"Minneapolis. She had a couple days off so she's doing a little self-

care trip. And hitting Costco."

"Oh, slay." He clears his throat. "I mean, I need to shower, but I could come over. I told my parents I was sleeping over at your place tonight, so I could be there for, like, I dunno, well over twenty-six hours."

"Wow, all mine for that long? Sounds too good to be true." I know he can't see it, but I'm smiling so wide that my cheeks hurt. Fuck, I'm excited. "And, don't worry about showering."

"But I stink. Like, *bad*. I smell like a nasty, sweaty bear with a glandular problem that fell in the Bog of Eternal Stench."

"Well if it's that bad, you might need an extra set of hands in that shower."

He's silent for a moment while he processes my suggestion. "Are you...."

"Come over," I tell him. "Just text me whenever you get here." And I hang up before he can say anything else, my heart beating faster than a hummingbird's wings.

All this stuff with Seb is still relatively new, almost three weeks now. I haven't even seen him shirtless yet, aside from that time he decided jumping off a cliff was a quirky and different way to pass the time. I'm pretty sure he's not going to want to shower together—not yet, if ever, and that's fine. I don't want to rush him. But I think tonight, stuff is going to go down. And I'm more excited than anything else, which is seriously the best. The fucking bestest.

I've applied just enough cologne for it to smell natural. And I'm wearing warm clothes fresh out of the dryer, a plain white T-shirt and some khakis, because it feels like dressing up without dressing up too much. I want to look good for Sebastian, but also not like I'm trying too hard, y'know?

It's about half an hour before my phone buzzes with Seb's arrival text message. He arrives at my doorway soaking wet—his hair, still undried from his shower, and his clothes run through by the rain.

I'm actually a little surprised by his chest. Yeah, I saw him at Lake Franz the night that this whole crazy thing began, but that was different. I wasn't paying attention then. Now, I can see a tantalizing amount of his torso. His long grey shirt is soaked and sticks to every inch of his skin. His pecs are mostly flat, and I can see the outline of those slim abs that skinny stick boys tend to have. I ... I like it. It's good. It's great.

I'm not going to tell him that I think he's incredibly hot, though. Not right now, at least. I'll save it for later. I hate feeling like a broken record, after all.

"Why on earth are you wearing jeans?" I ask him. "It's summer."

"What, they go with the shirt." He takes a step in from the rain. I close the wooden door behind him. He's so fucking close, close enough that I can smell the rain on his clothes and the lavender of his body wash.

I can also see the goosebumps running up his forearms. "Are you cold? Let me get you a change of clothes."

Seb snorts. "I'm surprised you didn't straight up suggest I take all my clothes off."

"Would you like me to?"

"Maybe."

A response I wasn't expecting for sure. "I mean ... we can do that. If you want."

"I'm not cold," Seb says. It's like our gazes are locked directly on each other.

"Then you're good in just your wet, soggy jeans and wet, soggy T-shirt?"

This time, he doesn't say anything. Just reaches down, eyes still on me, and pulls off his shirt. I try not to suck in a breath, but fuck. His skin is lily-white, covered in moles and freckles, with some acne reaching across the tops and sides of his shoulders. He really is a

skinny thing, so much so that I can see where his rib cage stops and his pelvis begins. But more so than anything else, to put it simply: he's beautiful.

"What do you think?" he whispers. "Should the wet, soggy jeans come off?"

Fuuuuuck. Seriously. Fuck.

"Yeah, we're going down to the basement, *right now*." I grab his hand and all but drag him along behind me. He laughs.

Our feet thud in syncopated steps as we race down the stairs. I turn around as soon as I'm at the bottom, and he's there with me, grabbing the sides of my torso and pulling me against him while simultaneously pushing the both of us back towards my bed. Our kissing is feverish, and it's as if I can't get enough of him. More, more, more, I need *more*, godammit.

He pushes me onto the edge of my bed and I arch my back so we can remove my shirt together. He's barely tossed it to the side when our lips are together once more, and he's suddenly there between my thighs, standing before my bed, pinning my hips down with strong hands. I wrap my hands around his shoulders, feeling soft skin and acne bumps. He bites my bottom lip, and I moan.

He pulls away. "What do you want?" he asks me, panting. And okay, fuck, I think I love everything about his face. The mole on his cheek and the freckles everywhere else, the ridge on his silly little Roman nose, how his Cupid's bow is more pointed than curved. The wildness of his eyebrows, the length of his lashes, the tiny golden flecks mixed in with the honey brown of his eyes. Love it.

"You," I whisper. "I want you, Sebastian. Do whatever you want."

He's still breathing hard. I am, too. "Are you sure? I'm not going to do anything to you if you aren't sure."

"I'm sure. Are you sure?"

"Yes." He kisses me deeply. "Yes," he murmurs again, against my lips this time. My lips part, and his tongue finds its way between them,

circling around the tip of my own. We deepen the kiss. He presses into me more, pulling my hips into him. I can feel his hardness digging against me. I don't stop my moan.

"I've never done this before," he whispers.

"It's okay," I assure him. "Just do what feels right. We don't have to go all the way."

He ponders this, then nods. "Okay. We won't go all the way."

I'm too excited to feel disappointment. Just being here with him, that's more than enough. "Perfect."

"But...." He smiles. I push his hair away from his face. He turns and presses a kiss to my palm, while I feel his delicate fingers work their way under the waistband of my khakis. "I'm still gonna need these pants to come off."

With deft fingers, he unbuttons them, and I lay there, watching him take me in his mouth, my hands wrapping themselves in his thick curls, but not pushing his head down. It feels *amazing*. I'm a moaning, trembling mess the whole time, guiding him where necessary. In the end, even *I'm* taken aback by the finish, laughing while I grab a towel for shocked, shirtless Seb.

This boy. This beautiful boy. The things he does to me, I swear.

A/N - I miss matcha lattes with a shot of raspberry. Like, baaaaad.

chapter twenty-four

[image]

sebastian

It's one a.m. on a Thursday night, and Harris has me all alone in his basement.

It's only my third time seeing it, yet it feels familiar. A mix of lived in and bare-bones, all mixed up with the dash of chaos one would expect when dealing with Harrison McCammon. When we came down earlier, I was surprised that his bed was made and that his laundry was in the hamper, honestly.

"You're sure I won't get you in trouble?" I ask him for the fiftieth time. His mom hadn't seemed particularly thrilled to have seen me walking out all that time ago, although she was really nice. It's not like I would have expected a better reaction from a parent discovering another teenager of the preferred sex sneaking out of the house in the wee hours of the morning, after all.

Harris either doesn't know about this, or doesn't care to dwell on it. "You're fine," he says. "She won't find out. And even if she asked, my grandma would vouch for us, no question."

Silently, I give praise to the great Granny Mac.

We had left for Paco's, eaten there, and now we're back at La Casa de McCammon. Despite everything we did earlier, I'm somehow even more nervous now. I just hope it doesn't show.

Dressed in flannel pajama bottoms and thick West Denton Track sweatshirt, Harris sits on the edge of his bed and looks at me, silently inviting me to join him. I sit down next to him, and he places his hand atop mine.

"I'm sorry things have been so weird," he says softly, rubbing his thumb atop my own. "And hectic. And thanks for everything that

night."

"Of course," I tell him, even though I'm sure he doesn't remember the extent of everything that went down. I almost want to say that that's probably better for him. I'm just glad that he's possibly admitting that *things* happened.

He leans his head against my shoulder and sighs. "You've been great," he says. And for a moment, selfishly, I panic. Because that feels like final words, somehow. Whatever this is, whatever we're doing, whatever we are, I don't want to lose it. I don't want him to break it off, but I'd have to respect his decision either way. Somehow, I can't envision my life suddenly being sans-Harrison.

"You *are* great," I tell him, because I don't know what else to say.

I feel the muscles in his cheek stiffen when he smiles. "Thanks," he whispers.

Instead of saying anything, I just turn my head and press an awkward kiss against his temple. I don't know what else I could say to him.

Harris tilts his head up, his lips parted just slightly, his eyes searching for mine. My heart thuds in my chest. I don't know why, but over the course of just a few weeks, I feel so much better about moving fast with Harris. That first night, I couldn't fathom having sex with him. But right now, if he asked, I would. It no longer feels rushed, or like we're grasping onto some fleeting, short-lived burst of chaotic coalescence. Goddamnit. Just the brief thought of him gently guiding me through my first time—fuck, okay, not right now, Sebastian.

"I'm going to kiss you," he whispers, and then he does.

His lips are soft against mine, each sweet movement of our mouths together drawing out the entirety of my breath till my lungs are empty, my chest is sore and on the verge of collapsing, but I can't stop to breathe, won't let us stop this. Harris's hands press against my chest, and I let him push me down onto the mattress. One of his legs goes over my torso, and he sits back just enough to feel me

beneath him. I gasp.

"Wow," he says, his eyes sparkling, "*someone* is having fun." He grinds against me just a moment, and *holy fuck*.

"Shut up," I whisper, squeezing my eyes shut, my head going back. I didn't know that this would feel so good. "You're so fucking evil."

He smiles, coy. "But this is okay?" He removes the pressure, and I want to call him back, beg him to move against me like that again.

"Yes," I breathe, "it's perfect. Don't stop."

"Okay." He grinds against me again, just right, so right that I can't even fathom it. Fuck. Wow. Okay.

"Come here," I tell him, largely breathless. I hold my hands out right as he smirks and leans down towards me. Then I'm pulling his face to meet my own, his hands gently grabbing my wrists while our mouths work in sync. His breath is hot on my face, and he's still grinding softly against me, and it's all I can do not to groan with pleasure against his lips.

He shifts forward, approaching his movement from a slightly different angle. I prop myself up on one elbow so I can wrap one hand around his hair and place a soft kiss against his neck. He always seems to like those best.

Harris freezes. I feel it as his thighs stiffen and squeeze mine together, in the worst possible angle.

"Ow, ow, Harris—"

He's looking down at me, his eyes wide and not quite there, but when he hears his name, he seems to snap out of it.

"Sorry, sorry." He scrambles off me and sits on the edge of his bed, kneeling with his hands on his knees. His chest heaves for breath.

"Are you okay?" I ask him.

When he looks up at me, his eyes are still wide, but more

vulnerable and frightened than completely distant. "I–I'm fine," he promises. "But ... I wanted to talk to you about something."

Dread sets in, but I know this conversation needs to happen, if it's the one I've been thinking of. I had wondered how much he remembered from that night. I think I'm about to find out.

"What's up?"

"What...." Even though we both know the question he's about to ask, he struggles to find the words, instead looking up at the ceiling. His Adam's apple bobs when he swallows nervously. Finally, he looks back at me. "What happened that night?"

"How much do you remember?" I ask him quietly.

"Can you just tell me everything you know? Everything is really random and sporadic for me."

So I tell him everything, just like he told me that night, and Saanvi rehashed the next day. When I'm finished, he's still sitting on the edge of the bed, hands on his knees. He's trying to breathe deep, probably in an attempt to calm down. I don't know that it's necessarily working.

"Are you okay?" I ask him. I don't care about hooking up or anything right now, I just want to make sure that Harris is alright. I'm too scared to touch him though, too scared that it'll be too much. So I sit there, my hands hovering over my lap until I let them drop, fingers curling slightly against my thighs.

It's like I can see him shake himself off. He looks over his shoulder and smiles weakly. "I'm okay."

"Are you sure? Because, you don't have to be."

His voice quavers, but he looks determined, I think. "At least I know now. What happened."

I don't know what to say to this. "Yeah."

"I'm really glad you and Saanvi were there," he says.

"Saanvi did the most, believe me."

"I don't care." He rubs his cheeks with the heels of his palms, closing his eyes. "You guys ... you don't get it."

I want to ask him what he means by that, but I'm also certain that it's not anything he's required to explain to me. So I ask instead, "Are you okay?"

"Mm." He nods. "Yeah, just processing."

"Okay." I watch as he bites his lip, his hands moving to rub his neck.

"I just ... I feel so stupid. I should have seen this coming from him." He sighs. The sigh is shaky. "He oversteps boundaries a lot. And he made me uncomfortable a while back, so I kind of wanted to stop being friends with him. But I just, I fucking couldn't, no matter how hard I tried."

He blinks hard, stopping to think before he continues. "I wish I had known how bad he was before all this. But, Seb, I'm looking back, and there were so many signs. I just couldn't make myself quit him. He's fucking addictive somehow. Like, fucking worse than cigarettes. That's a lame analogy. Fuck. I don't know."

I don't say anything, just listen to him.

"I don't want to think that maybe, if I were stronger or smarter or just knew better, I'd have ended things," he says slowly, staring down at his hands. He clenches and unclenches his fists a few times. "Stopped talking to him. Avoided him, told him to fuck off, whatever."

I'm gearing up to tell him this wasn't his fault when he says, "But I'm also not the ... fuck, the attempted rapist, so I'm gonna chalk this up to this being a Liam Problem, not a Harris Problem." He looks up at me, smiling weakly. He's so expressive. Every thought he's ever had has had to have been written all over his face, no doubt. And right now is absolutely zero exception. "Is.... I'm not crazy for that, right?"

"You're not crazy," I assure him immediately, then ask once more,

"Are you sure you're okay?"

He nods. "I'm okay. But, could we just watch a movie or something instead of...." His voice trails off, and even though I want to ask him to fill in the blank and tell me where he thought this was going, I don't.

I smile. "I *guess*. So long as the movie is good."

Harris grins back. This time, it's sincere.

A/N - @Spruce_Goose just posted the SWEETEST review of BOWD and I literally cannot function, omg. I LOVE YOU AMELIA AHHHHHHH 😭 I'll link it in the external link. GO READ HER BOOKS GODAMMIT.

Aaanyways. See you guys on Tuesday!

chapter twenty-five

[image]

harris

I feel like I should feel more awkward than I do for freaking out in front of Seb like that. Somehow, I don't feel bad at all. Actually, I feel fucking fantastic. I don't think I've ever had a conversation like that, one where I felt taken care of and listened to and, I don't know, validated? Is that what I'm feeling?

I really like this boy.

Seriously, this is bad. I *like*–like him, which is so not good. From personal experience, when you have a crush on your friend with benefits, things can tend to go awry pretty quickly. Which is terrifying, because that's the one thing I *don't* want to happen. Losing Seb? I couldn't do it.

We're curled up on the couch, watching movie two of the night—the second *How to Train Your Dragon* due to what I guess is becoming a mini-marathon, although I don't know if I have it in me to watch the third. His head is on my lap, and I'm trying hard not to think of all that we did earlier. It was perfect though, way better than the first time Liam ever gave me head. This was smoother. Better. There was an actual *connection.* Also, Seb asked first. Always a plus.

I returned the favor afterwards. I hope he liked mine as much as I liked his.

My fingers tug through the occasional tangle in his hair, undoing every miniscule knot and admiring the silkiness of his freshly-washed hair. It took a while to dry after his earlier walk in the rain. We waited until there was a break in the weather to grab our Paco's, but outside now, I can hear the distant rumblings of thunder, signaling the on-coming of another storm.

Seb sighs. "I'm getting so sleepy," he says. "I don't know if I can stay up longer."

It's not that late, but I'm tired, too. "I'm exhausted," I tell him, still running my fingers through his hair.

"Do we wanna finish this...?" he asks, turning to look up at me. His shoulder digs into my thigh, just a little, but I don't mind it.

"I mean, are you too tired? We can head downstairs." I move my hand from his hair to his arm and rub little circles over the T-shirt I lent him, because his grey shirt was too soaked. He's wearing my basketball shorts too, although I can't see them under the blanket he insisted upon covering up with.

He sighs through his nose. "Yeah, maybe."

He doesn't say anything for a minute. His eyes are focused on Hiccup Haddock on-screen, but I'm watching him. He's got a few pimples on his temples, reaching onto his cheekbones, but the breakup is clearing up. Even more so now than at the start of the summer, his face is all freckles, blossoming across every inch of pale skin. There's not enough sunscreen in the world for this boy, I swear.

"Well," I tell him, "we can head down then. Did you bring a toothbrush?"

Seb sighs again, stretching in my lap. His head presses down in a not-terrible spot, but I ignore it. "Yeeeep."

"Cool, cool."

"Why? Does the thought of my morning breath perturb you, McCammon?" he asks, looking back up at me. His irises look almost black, what with the only source of light in the room coming from the blue-hued ice on-screen.

"Oh, most definitely," I tell him, then bend my knee up. His body goes limp, just to fuck with me. I grin. "C'mon, let's go to bed."

He groans as I lift his shoulders and stand up. "Do I have to get up?"

he asks, pouting. "I'm so comfy."

"You can stay there," I assure him. "Enjoy sleeping on the couch."

"Uuuuuuuggggghh. Fine."

Seb picks himself up off the couch with yet another grumble, standing and rolling his head from one side to the other. "You better spoon me so hard," he says.

"Whaaat? I thought I'd be little spoon."

"Definitely not." He tiredly rubs the sides of his face. "I like the thought of your arms around me."

"Awwww."

"Shut the fuck up, Harris."

"What, it's adorable." We head to the basement stairs, awkwardly standing next to each other until I take his hand, and suddenly, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. There's a thrum of excitement rushing through my abdomen at the mere thought of sleeping together. Not sex, but literally *sleeping*.

Sebastian Krause is going to spend the night in my arms. Which sounds like a pretty sweet deal to me.

"You're so cute," I tell him while we're headed down the stairs. I'm holding onto the rail, leading the way for the both of us. "Just in case you didn't know."

His grip on my hand tightens. "Simp."

"Dipshit."

And just like that, we're standing in front of my bed. The towel from earlier is still there, and I really hope that my blush isn't visible. I still can't believe how good that had felt, his mouth on me like that. He had the hand-mouth-hand combination down pat. I could hardly believe it was his first time. It took me and Liam a while to play around and figure that out. When I'd asked him about

it, he'd shrugged and said, "Internet." I'd nudged him and said, "Mad skills."

I pick the towel up and chuck it onto the floor, then walk over to turn off the overhead light, exchanging it for the soft yellow of my desk lamp. "Do you mind if I sleep shirtless?" I ask Seb.

"Nope. Which side of the bed do you want?"

"Uhhh, that one," I tell him, pointing to the side on our collective left. "If you don't mind."

His smile is soft and easy. "I don't mind."

"Cool, cool, cool." I rip off my sweatshirt in one deft maneuver. "If you want to sleep shirtless or whatever, I don't mind."

"What does 'whatever' mean here?" he asks, laughing. "What, is that just naked?"

Aha. Fuck. Naked. Naked. "I mean, it could." I shrug. Please, *please* let me appear nonchalant. "It's up to you."

Seb keeps his gaze on me the whole time. He bites his lip for just a second, something that must be intentional, which is absolutely evil because it definitely has the intended effect. With no preamble, he's taking off the shirt I lent him, and then his nimble fingers are untying the drawstring of the basketball shorts, and he's shimmying them down to the floor, where they land in a heap around his socks.

It leaves him in just his boxers, plain and black. And, fuck, he's hard. He's not the only one.

"Let's get into bed," he whispers, craning his neck down to kiss me.

I don't say anything; I just meet his gaze with my own, an unspoken understanding passing between us. And then our lips meet, and I'm filled with a buzzing warmth I haven't felt in a long, long time.

This is different from the other times we've fooled around. I think we both know that. I'm more nervous for sure, but I'm not scared.

We get under the covers, hiding beneath the fluffy blanket on my bed right as the storm hits. Rain pounds against the tin sides of my window well, and the fuzzy warm light of my desk lamp is just enough to light up about three-fourths of his body beneath me. I'm between his legs again, feeling my hard length press up against his stomach. His hands slide down my bare back, his touch torturously light. I want him to pull me tight against him, so tight that it feels like our bodies are one, and that each of our breaths will mingle.

I'm pressing kisses to the sensitive skin just beneath his collarbone. Soft at first, but gradually, they harden, until I'm sucking hard enough to leave a hickey—something he'll be able to hide with a shirt, yet something we'll both know is there.

Seb's hands glide up and down my back. He's breathing hard, and I know this teasing is torturous for him. But the more impatient he is, the more I find myself wanting to play around.

My lips trace their way down his chest to his stomach, just to above his boxers. Fuck, he's so hard. I press a quick kiss against the tent in his boxers, and he gasps, his hands knotting themselves in my hair.

"Harris," he groans, but I'm already moving back up to kiss him.

"Shh," I tell him.

"Wait, wait," he says, and I can feel the hesitation in his voice. I stop, right as we're face to face.

"What is it?"

His forehead scrunches up, leaving these cute little lines. I want to kiss each one, but I refrain. "Do you have lube? And protection?"

"Yeah, don't worry," I assure him. My mom was always adamant about using protection, even with guys (especially Liam), so it's pretty ingrained. I don't need the herpes talk again. "We've got plenty of condoms and plenty of lube, okay?"

He nods. "Okay."

"Okay." I press a kiss to his forehead, and he sucks in a breath, his

hands on my hips. "You're sure about this?"

"Yes. Are you?"

I kiss him again, this time on his temple. "Yes."

"Okay," he says, then exhales. "I'm ready."

"We'll go slow," I promise him. "I won't rush this."

He nods, and this time, I kiss him on the lips, just so he can kiss me back.

chapter twenty-six

[image]

sebastian

When I wake up in the morning, I've rolled out of Harris' arms to the opposite edge of the bed. But our legs are still tangled together, and he's still on his side, facing me with his eyes shut.

Carefully, I untangle our limbs and roll onto my side to face him. He's so delicate when he sleeps. Usually, with how often he's smiling or laughing, Harris has all these happy little lines on his face. Although I'm sure they'll be more permanent when he's older, right now, they're nowhere to be seen. In fact, Harris is frowning slightly in his sleep, this little Grumpy Cat look that makes me want to laugh. And I would, if I weren't worried about waking him up.

I don't know how long I lie there, staring at him while attempting to not feel creepy about it. Eventually, I decide to roll onto my other side and check my phone. The first Instagram story I click on is of a few juniors—now seniors—from the debate team swimming in the quarry at sunset, on the pH testing side, not me and Harris'. It almost looks fun, but see also: excrement-laden waters. No thanks. I'm no Elana Doorsey. I'm nobody. Jumping off that cliff into Lake Franz was a big, bold thing for me to try, just to get out of my own head. I don't know how much more out of my head I can be.

I click to the next story. And what a coincidence—Elana Doorsey herself. In a hospital bed. Making a duck face. *Guess who ended up in the hospital, slayyyy*.

Wow. See, this. This is why I don't do things.

The movement of my turning over must wake Harris, though, because next thing I know, he's snaking an arm over my bare side and pressing a soft kiss against the back of my neck.

"Morning," he says, and fuck, his voice is so gravelly. I can't.

"Good morning," I tell him, unsure of whether or not I'm supposed to turn around. My mouth tastes terrible, I realize—morning breath is not my friend, evidently. "How did you sleep?"

I feel him stretch his legs out. Some joint of his cracks, and he groans. "Not bad," he says. "You?"

"Pretty good." I'm trying not to overthink 'not bad,' even though it's a little hard. "The storm put me right to sleep."

"Nice. The cardio put *me* right to sleep."

I snort, setting my phone back down next to my pillow. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're welcome."

His arm tightens around me, pulling me against him. His morning wood presses against my lower back, but I'm too tired to even think about the prospect of morning sex. I'll need at least two minutes of waking-up time before that. But I'm not sure that Harris has that on his mind, because he simply nuzzles against the crook of my neck and shoulder, then mutters, "Thank you," so quietly that I wouldn't be surprised if I dreamed it.

Goddamn. This boy. Saanvi has been trying to get me to reassess things with him, see where we stand, but I can't bring myself to do it. This is all too perfect. I can't risk ruining it.

I can feel his arm flex as he tries to pop another joint. "You're so cute," he says. "Seriously, thank you for last night. I had a great time."

"Yeah, thank you too." *A great time*. I'm telling myself to not overthink it, but there's a niggling urge to know: am I just 'a great time' to Harris?

Nope. Nope. Don't think about it. You know you're not.

He presses another feather-light kiss against my skin, sending shivers down my spine. I guess I can overthink it later.

"Got any plans for today?" I ask him, admittedly a little proud of myself for not asking anything embarrassing—and/or too heavy for

this early in the morning.

"Nope," Harris says. "Why?"

I shrug. The movement shifts his arm, and he readjusts. I'm a little icked out by his hand's sudden presence on my stomach, but he moves it up to my diaphragm without me saying anything. Another kiss against my neck, and suddenly, I'm melting into him, our bodies seemingly melding together. His arm is tight around me, and I sigh as his fingers trace down my exposed side.

He leads me on like that, slowly turning me on through my morning brain fog, then chuckles softly. "Why?" he asks again. "What are your plans for today?"

I can't see his face right now, but I can imagine his expression—smug. Oh, he's definitely pleased with himself right now, and honestly, I can't even blame him. "Nothing really," I tell him. "Just wanted to know what you're thinking."

"I mean, I was thinking about going swimming."

"At the public pool?"

"Man, fuck public pools."

"So, where, Lake Franz? Ew."

"Shut uuup." He's smiling, I can hear it. "If it's too gross for you, we could always try the quarry."

The golden hour-lit juniors pop up in my head. You see people do it once or twice, but the quarry is beyond unappealing to me. "Um, no, you're right. Franz is way less gross than Wetspring."

"That's what I thought." His lips. Fuck. They're just so fucking soft against my skin. I can't handle it, so I turn around to face him. His arm slides around me because he seemingly knows what I'm thinking, he always knows, and then our lips are pressed together, his tongue slipping inside and finding my own, teasing me.

He doesn't seem to mind my morning breath, and I find that his is

just as ignorable. My hands are right up against him, one tangled in his messy hair, the other pressed against his sternum. I'm hard now too, but I couldn't lie to you—no way do I have the energy for that.

Luckily, Harris seems to be similarly exhausted from last night. He rests our foreheads together, and I find I don't even mind the feeling of our sweat mingling. He's breathing a little hard. So am I. When he pulls back a few inches to look me in the eye, I'm right there with him. Seeing his gaze locked on mine reminds me of last night, when he pulled away from our kiss to do just this. Just, oh my gosh. He's amazing.

"What do you wanna eat for breakfast?" he asks.

"What kinds of cereal do you have?" I counter, even though the thought of making something like waffles together sounds beyond cute. I should probably keep that to myself though. Harris seems like he shoves four Eggos in the toaster before school and pours an ungodly amount of syrup on them, and calls it "breakfast."

"Nah," he says, shaking his head slightly. "We're not playing the cereal game yet. Can I cook anything for you?"

"You cook?" I ask him, honestly taken aback.

"Uhhh, yeah." He says it like it should be obvious, even though it's so obviously not. "What, do I seem too lazy or something?"

He seems like he's anticipating his feelings being hurt, somehow. I don't know how I can tell, but it's easy to. "No, no, I just wasn't expecting it, you cooking."

"Hmph."

"It's hot," I assure him, sneaking in to press a kiss next to his mouth. I could kiss him all day, any and everywhere. "You cooking? Wowwww. Why, *sheesh*, even."

"Alright, alright, alright, quit trying to butter me up, you dork. What do you want to eat?"

"Waffles?" I offer, because fuck, now I'm in the mood.

He does one of those tight-lipped, sweetly dorky smiles. "I don't have a waffle maker. But how about pancakes?"

"Pancakes," I agree, then kiss him some more.

—

He's perfect, I decide. Harrison McCammon is perfect.

We're in his kitchen, bowls littering the sink now that the last of the pancake batter is gone. Harris is in loose basketball shorts and his same sweatshirt from last night, frowning into the fridge.

"I thought we had syrup," he says, leaning back to peek around the door, his look apologetic. "Are you okay with whipped cream?"

"Is that even a question?"

"Just making sure."

He dollops some generic-brand Cool Whip onto both plates of pancakes, then goes back to the fridge to grab a box of blueberries and strawberries, checking both boxes before rinsing a couple handfuls of each of the fruits.

"No mold," he promises, "although it's probably a good thing we're eating these today."

He walks out from the kitchen, a plate and silverware in each hand. I've been sitting at the dining room table for most of the pancake–cooking—a punishment for being too physical in the kitchen, which is probably fair, because "kitchen plus horny" likely equals "terrible disaster."

When he sits my plate down in front of me, I'm beyond surprised. I mean, he isn't just sweet and shamelessly clueless and caring, but also *cooks*? Fuck. Alright, okay, whatever, fine, he's just perfect, it's whatever, I don't care. Not one bit.

He's watching me while I eat. I'm trying to pretend that I don't notice, but when you're the only two people in the room, and sitting so close together at that, it's kind of hard not to make it obvious. So

I go for the second best option and ask, "What?"

"Hm?" Harris asks, poking into a blueberry with his fork. "Nothing."

"No, you're staring. What is it?"

He smirks, just a little, enough to make my stomach flip, and repeats, "Nothing. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're so frustrating."

"And you love it." He licks a dollop of whipped cream off his thumb.

I find myself smiling and rolling my eyes, just a little. "Maybe." And I know he knows that, yes. I do. I love it. I absolutely love it.

chapter twenty-seven

[image]

harris

Seb is the first off the cliff. Not because he jumps—not like last time.

No, this time? This time, I push him.

It's fine, he was being a chicken.

I wait to see where he resurfaces before attempting a jump of my own. He landed pretty soundly in the water, feet first, and I'm happy to report that he's not drowning. It's a muggy, humid day, one where the ground is still wet from the rain the night before, and a wall of thick clouds hangs in the distance, another storm threatening for later. But above us, the sun is beating down harshly on exposed skin, and I can't stand the heat any longer.

The wind is cold against my chest when I jump. It whistles harshly in my ears, and I suck in a breath right before I hit the water, plunging in foot-first. I exhale through my nose as soon as I'm beneath the surface, taking a second to gather myself before swimming back up to breathe.

Sebastian is there, treading water and looking incredibly pissed off. I rub the algae-ridden lake water from my eyes just in time to see him push back his silky black curls. With his hair all pushed back like that, it's kind of giving Tom Hiddleston as Loki. I'm surprised that it's so attractive to me, but, then again, I find just about everything about Sebastian to be attractive.

Even right now, how he's glowering at me: attractive.

He splashes me with one hand. "Why did you fucking push me, you asshole?"

I can't help but laugh. He just continues to glare until I can catch my breath. "Sorry, sorry, I should have asked. You just ... you were waiting there for five minutes, brah."

He points. It's suitably threatening. "I'm not your *brah*."

"Shhhhh." I splash him back. "Just shhhhhhhh now, sleeeeep."

He rolls his eyes and tries to splash me again, but I swim away from him, laughing. "Come here, don't even," he says, already paddling to try and catch up with me. I keep swimming away from him, my strokes shorter than his but seemingly more powerful.

It takes him a while to catch up to me. When he does, we're right by the cliff's wall, heaving for breath. I'm smiling. He's not, but he's not mad. I can tell.

"C'mere," I say, paddling towards him instead of running again.

Seb doesn't say anything, but he meets me in the middle. His face is wet, water droplets running down his temples and cheeks. His lips are wet too, but they're warm, and they fit perfectly against mine, so I'm not complaining.

"You kiss good," he whispers, our noses touching.

"No, *you* kiss good." Our lips meet again, and I stifle a groan.

We kiss like that for a while, Seb's arms around my shoulders, me kicking beneath the surface to keep both of us afloat. My hands are just above his hips, my fingers pressed against the loose fabric of his swim trunks. The nylon of the shorts is smooth and rough simultaneously, and they're so loose that the fabric swishes around my fingers. I press my fingers harder into his hips. Seb moans.

And then something slippery slides against my foot.

"OHHH, WHAT THE FUCK." My leg lashes out into the murky waters on instinct. I completely forget that I'm treading for the both of us. Seb and I both bob down down for a second, but then he starts kicking, picking up my slack.

"What is it?" he asks, grabbing my hips to steady me.

I'm panting a little harder than I'd like to admit. "Nothing," I assure him, because seriously, it would have been. "Just, a fish or some shit touched my foot."

He wrinkles his nose. "Fuck that," he says. "Wanna get out?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

We swim towards shore, immediately lying down on the rocky banks when we reach them. Stones dig into my back, but I don't care. My chest is heaving, and so is Seb's, and suddenly, without warning, I start laughing, and I can't stop.

Seb joins in too, like he can't help it. "What?" he asks. "What is so funny?"

"I don't know. I just, being here with you, like that, and then ... fish."

"Fish." He sighs and rolls onto his side to face me. I follow suit, ignoring the gravel scraping my arm. "It's pretty funny that you'd be afraid of fish."

"Umm, I'm not afraid of anything, actually?"

"I highly doubt that. There's gotta be *something*."

Liam's face pushes its way into my mind, and for a split second, I have to remind myself to breathe. It's fine. That's never going to happen again. "Mushrooms. I am deathly afraid of mushrooms."

"What, like, to eat? Or to microdose or whatever?"

Microdose. Like I'd have the balls for anything other than weed. "Um, neither, but also, both? Mushrooms in general."

Seb settles his head down onto his hand and smiles softly. "Is there a story behind your great fear of mushrooms, or are you just silly and goofy like that?"

"Oh, dear Sebastian, I have a reason for everything. Didn't you know?"

"Well, pray tell, just what is your tale of devastation and woe in regard to ... doth shrooms?"

I shrug, still smiling. With one hand, I shake out the front of my hair so it doesn't dry too crazy, even though I'm sure we'll be headed back in any minute now. "So, my mom is a doctor, right?"

"Right."

"And my grandma is, like, a total Fireside Girl."

"Niche reference, but okay."

I roll my eyes at him. "*Anyways*, I was out for a walk with my grandma and mom, and apparently four-year-old me found this batch of wild mushrooms. And neither of the adults present could figure out what they were. All they knew was that—"

Seb sighs, eyes shut tight. "You ate them?"

"How did you guess?"

"Because that is literally the most *you* thing you could have done."

"Yeah, probably." I stretch my legs out and flinch when a chilly wave touches the tip of my toes. "So, long story short, I get rushed to the emergency room, but my mom and my grandma are absolutely *furious* with me, and—"

"As they should."

"Ummm, who asked? That's right. No one."

"So that's why you're afraid of mushrooms," Seb says. "Because four-year-old you thought you were going to die?"

"Yep. Pretty much."

"Wow."

"Yeah, it's a pretty Doctor Doofenshmirtz background story."

He squints his eyes nearly shut. "What is with the *Phineas and Ferb* references today? You're two for two."

"Three for three, actually. Only real ones will spot the third. And, how dare you—that is my *earliest* hospital memory, thank you."

"Mm, speaking of hospital," Seb says, "you'll never guess who was taking glam shots from their hospital bed?"

"Oh, I like this game!" I stretch my arms and legs out, forming one big 'X' against the dirty beach for a moment. I'm still soaked, so dirt clings to me, but I don't care. "Ummm ... Liam?"

"If only."

"That was my only guess."

Seb mimics my stretching. Our fingers brush, and I try not to laugh at how unexpectedly ticklish it is. "Elana Doorsey."

"Oh, dude, what the fuck?" I wonder what it could have been—a bad cliff jump seems most likely. Elana has an obsession with diving into Wetspring Quarry. She says it's fun, though, and she's been doing it for years. So maybe it was something else? Yeah. Yeah, it must have been. "Is she okay?"

"Seems to be. Her duck face is intact."

"Oh, well, good for her. That's her most valuable asset."

Seb sighs and sits up. It gives his stomach these cute little stomach rolls, and I'm consumed by the urge to put my head on his lap, even here, shivering and exposed in the warm summer air. It's this unstoppable force, this wanting to be close to him. Yet somehow, I refrain, thankfully.

"You're a goober," Seb says. "Wanna go for a walk?"

"Hmm, what's in it for me?"

"Who knows?" He walks over to a rock near the shore and scoops up his cerulean beach towel. I hold back laughs at his bow-legged, "the rocks are hurting my feet" stance. "Maybe we'll find some wild mushrooms along the way."

"Not funny. I was *traumatized*."

"Yeah, I am so sure."

I stand too, and he tosses me my ancient red-and-white striped towel. It hits me full on in the face, but it doesn't hurt. I sling it over my shoulder like nothing embarrassing just happened, and suddenly, I've got something I need to try. "Wanna go look out at the quarry?"

It's impossible to really see the rich green foliage surrounding the lake, or the green sheen of its algae-touched surface. The sky is blue and cloudless, the sun is bright, and even the lake's smell isn't terribly overpowering. And yet, all I can focus on is Seb. Seb's smiling face, the little crinkles near his eyes, how his lips curl up more playfully at the edges than anywhere else.

"You read my fucking mind."

chapter twenty-eight

[image]

sebastian

The quarry is as vibrant as it always is, its practically tropical cerulean waters out of place next to the forest green foliage surrounding it. There's not a cloud in the sky today, so there's no avoiding the harsh summer sun. The warning sign has been knocked down on its front side, probably by last night's storm, but it's not as if you can forget the warnings that are currently laying face down against the earth.

Unless you're Harris, that is.

"Okay, I wanna go swim in there so bad," he says, peering down over the cliff's edge. It's a little more of a drop than the Lake Franz edge, but it's not any more intimidating than a public pool high dive.

Still, diving into toxic waters is an absolute no.

"Harris."

"What?"

"Absolutely not."

He's still shirtless, his red-and-white-striped towel draped over his shoulders. His hair is pushed up against his forehead, and his cheekbones have turned red in the summer sun. With his skin all tan and glistening like that—not to mention some tan and glistening *abs*, oh lord—I'm caught a little speechless for a second.

Harris notices. Because, of course he does. "What?" he asks, his smile lopsided.

"Nothing." I want to date this boy. I hate myself.

"Sure." He stretches, flexing his arms above his head. Fuck. He knows what he's doing. He's actually the worst. "You scared to go for a little dip in Wetspring Quarry?"

I'm sorry, but he's standing right next to the overturned sign. Has he seriously forgotten the potential consequences of a *little dip* in Wetspring? Stupid debate team juniors are one thing. Elana Doorsey is one thing. Harris? Harris should know better.

"Harris, absolutely not," I tell him, hoping I sound a little more self-assured than I feel. There's this niggling idea that somehow, it could be fun. But it's got to be too dangerous for us to actually do it. There is a *sign* for a *reason*. "You know what could happen. Can you imagine explaining to your mom that you caught some kind of infection thing from the lake?"

Harris shrugs it off. "I'll work it out. C'mon. C'mon, it looks so nice and cool and *fuuun*. Other people have done it." He looks legitimately excited, but I don't care. I am *not* going swimming in this god-forsaken quarry. What if I die? What if I jump in and die?

"Besides," Harris continues, "if it's soooo toxic, then what are we going to catch from it?"

"What?"

"Like, if it's too toxic, then how can any kind of bacteria thing survive in there?"

"Harris. No. What? No. That is so inherently flawed. Like, I think that might be the stupidest argument I've ever heard. Ever. And not just on one level, on *multiple*." Honestly, I cannot believe that he thinks that this would be a good idea. What on earth has gotten into him?

Harris pouts. "But it looks so summer."

"'It looks so summer' is not reason enough for me to go in."

"People go in all the time, and no one has died," he argues. "Some of the track guys went after graduation. A few of them even skinny-dipped. Look at us! We're fully clothed. We're even better off than

they are, and they were fine!"

The debate kids from last night. The smiles in their videos. The laughter. The sheer enjoyment. But no. Nope. I can't let myself get caught up in the aesthetics of jumping into a gorgeous yet disgusting pit of standing water. "Harris. It feels kinda stupid."

"Just for a few minutes. To cool off. It's so hot today."

He's not wrong. The summer heat is scalding, even with droplets of lake water still clinging to my skin. I'm sure my shoulders are already starting to burn. It's going to be a rough one for sure.

"Harris, I—"

"Pleeeaaase?"

"Oh my god, are you five years old? What has gotten into you?"

He's still smiling. "It's okay. Just five minutes, Seb. And then maybe we could go home and...."

"Shower together?" The idea of the quarry disgusts me so much, to the point that even a shower with Harris doesn't sound appealing.

"Your idea, not mine." And then he turns, races towards the edge, and jumps.

Fucking godammit. Are you kidding me?

I'm right behind him, peering off the edge of the ledge to make sure he resurfaces. The water bubbles up where he landed, foaming up and sending waves crashing out in a circle around him. His head breaks the surface. He splutters for a moment, coughing up quarry water. He wipes excess water away from his closed eyes with one hand, then pushing back his hair. And, of course, he's laughing.

"It feels amazing!" he shouts up. "Come on!"

"Me finishing your sentence was NOT a yes, Harris!"

"Oh, come on. Pleeeaaaase?"

He's treading water, some fifteen, eighteenish feet beneath me. His smile is wide and infectious, and I hate that he's down there in the quarry, because there's a small part of me that does want to try it, just once, but common sense is telling me not to even dare.

"It's warmer than the lake!" he promises. "Just a few minutes. So we can say we did this together."

I don't know why, but that last part sells me. This stupid, stupid boy and his stupid, stupid, stupid ideas. He's going to be the death of me.

"FINE. Move your flat ass out of my way."

"My ass is bigger than yours, and we both know it." But he obliges me, swimming backward to give me space.

I take a few deep breaths. It's fine. It'll be just a few minutes. No worries. No worries at all. I started off the summer—and this whole thing with Harris—by jumping off a cliff impromptu, just to get out of my own head. This? This is nothing.

And look. He's down there waiting for me. It'll be just a few minutes. Nothing more.

Before I can talk myself out of it, my legs are moving, and the wind is whistling through my wet hair. I hold my body stick-straight and brace for impact.

The quarry water is different than the lake water. As I kick up to the surface, a little too scared to see how deep the quarry goes, the warmth of the water surprises me. I think it's more than being a little more adjusted thanks to the dip in the lake—this water is legitimately warmer.

I breach the surface and try to wipe the water off my face before inhaling. The same goes for my eyes, then my hair. I'm holding my chin back as I tread the water, suddenly terrified I'm going to accidentally ingest something that I shouldn't.

"You did it!" Harris says, gliding towards me with smooth free-style strokes.

"Yeah, I did it," I tell him, even though my stomach is turning. "Can we get out now?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course." He looks a little apologetic. "Sorry. I didn't want to.... I shouldn't have pushed you so hard. Or just jumped like that."

"Well *that* was a quick introspection turn-around."

His smile is small and thin. "You just look really uncomfortable. I'm sorry. Let's go home and wash off."

"Yeah, I'm down."

We're paddling towards the shore, Harris consistently keeping a little ahead of me despite him obviously trying to swim at my snail's pace. "Why'd you do it?" I ask him, chin still way up to try and avoid the quarry water going up my nose.

"Do what? Jump?"

"Yeah." We're nearing the shore now, but I'm terrified my foot is going to scrape one of those cars the warning sign had mentioned. Or an animal carcass. Excrement, even. Oh lord, am I going to die before I even get out of this quarry?

"I dunno. Sorry. Something came over me, and I just, I wanted to do something fun with you. I thought one jump would be ... memorable. Also, the water is pretty nice, you've gotta admit it."

"Yeah." It really is nice, until you think about how there's a massive sign that basically screams at you not to do this exact thing.

My feet touch the edge of the stony beach, the same one I stood on when I was twelve-years-old and measured the quarry's pH levels with Saanvi. I remember the value now—it was a shocking 10.9, even back then. I'm terrified we're swimming through liquid ammonia right now, something I'm not sure Harris even realizes.

Fuck, why did I let him jump in here? Ew ew ew ew. We are so going to die. Ew ew ew ew ew ew, absolutely fucking disgusting.

"Okay, we gotta go rinse off, asap" I tell him. "Can you smell that?"

Harris gives me a quizzical look. "No?"

"It's the smell of impending doom, because I let you talk me into diving into incredibly toxic water. So, let's go, let's go."

He looks up to the cliff. "What about our towels?"

Ugh. "Fuck. Yeah, let's go grab them." Shit shit shit. My body feels disgusting. I'm going to die. We're going to die. Why did we dive into that fucking quarry?

"Here, don't worry about it," Harris says. "I'll run the long way and grab our stuff. You head back to the truck, okay?"

I try to breathe normally, but oh my god. This was *such* a stupid risky teen thing. I do not partake in stupid risky teen things. I hate stupid risky teen things. They are *literally* the bane of my existence.

"Okay, sure. Thanks."

I watch Harris race off along the stony beach, somehow not flinching at the sharp rocks likely cutting into his feet. Oh my gosh, I hope he doesn't get quarry water into a cut. Why did we do this? We are so, so, so going to die. Fuck. Like, actually, fuck.

This was a very, very bad idea.

chapter twenty-nine

[image]

harris

I feel like such a piece of shit. Why did I jump into the quarry? And why did I make Seb feel like *he* had to too?

I can't describe the exact feeling that overcame me. I was looking down at the quarry waters, and it just ... it looked so clear. So clear, and pristine, and so, so warm. And in my head, the whole "toxic waters" thing didn't even matter. Just a few minutes would be fine. Others have done it. Repeatedly. And they've had harmless fun each time. But I shouldn't have done that. Shouldn't have jumped, and *definitely* shouldn't have pressed Seb into following along behind me.

I'm drying off as I run down the side of the hill, still barefoot. There's no one in our area of Lake Franz, so there's no one to see me snatch up me and Seb's shoes. I'm holding a shit ton of stuff in my arms—our towels, our shoes, Seb's keys. I toss them all onto the passenger seat, except for my towel, which I set down on the driver's seat so that the icky quarry water soaking my swim trunks doesn't completely ruin Seb's leather seats. I hope.

I pull out from the parking lot, headed to the little road I know he's bound to be taking. And sure enough, there he is, walking barefoot and looking completely pissed off. Which, honestly, a very valid response. I feel terrible.

I unlock the doors as I pull up alongside him and toss the truck into park. "You wanna drive?" I call out of the rolled-down window.

Seb just shakes his head and hops into the passenger side. Once again, he doesn't move the seat back, so his knees are pressed up against the dash. I almost say something, but with the way he's glowering, decide that now might not be the best time.

"My place?" I ask. I wouldn't be surprised if he wants to go home. I feel like an asshole.

"Yeah, that works." He's staring out the window. I've never seen him like this, not since we've started spending time together. We're into July now—it's the fourteenth today—so it's been over a month. This is so unlike him.

I fucked up.

I turn up his stereo. It blasts Fruit Bats' *Humbug Mountain Song*, something I know is one of Seb's favorites. But he reaches over and clicks a different CD slot. The first song starts playing, and okay. Did not know he was an Enya fan.

"Are you okay?" I ask him.

"I'll be fine," he mutters. "I just wanna fucking shower. I feel gross."

"I really am sorry. I shouldn't have pressured you like that. I—"

"You didn't pressure me," Seb says. Which is so untrue. I feel like I definitely did, even if it was just a little bit. "I'm an adult. You didn't force me to jump. I wanted to. Seriously"

"But you wouldn't have if not for me. So, I'm sorry I was so insistent. I pestered you, and—"

"Let it go, Harrison." I blink. He's never used my full name before, not that I can recall. "I just wanna go shower."

"You can take my bathroom," I tell him, because I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to shower with me right now. "I'll take my mom's."

"Thanks." Yet another mumble. He is so pissed. And, seriously, I don't blame him.

The rest of the drive back is completely silent. I don't want to make him think that I'm mad at him, or that I'm trying to be spiteful because I can't handle him being mad at *me*. If anything, I'm mad at myself. I deserve it right now. Even though Seb insists that it's fine, it's *not*. I feel terrible. I pressured him into jumping into a filthy

quarry, and now, I feel like a complete and utter asshole. In all honesty, I am one.

We finally arrive at my house. "Are you sure you're okay?" I turn and ask him, slamming the truck into park and shutting off the engine.

"I'm fine." He's already unbuckling. He manages a slight smile. "I just really, really wanna shower. Before I get toxic bleach water parasites and die."

"Okay." I suck. I suck so bad.

Seb heads down the stairs and I trudge along to my mom's bathroom, grabbing a towel from the cupboard along the way. Jumping into the quarry no longer feels like some fun little throwaway thing—it feels disgusting, and I feel like an idiot.

I wash myself off in the shower, scrubbing so hard at my skin that it turns red and blotchy, and any and all scabs of mine are ripped off, leaving small little dots of blood welling up along my knees and forearms. I scrub and I scrub and I scrub, but nothing makes that gross feeling go away. I feel like an asshole. I *am* an asshole.

When I'm out of the shower, I dry my hair first, my body still dripping wet while I scrub my scalp. I smell like my mother, of her coconut shampoo and her lavender body wash. I'm as rough with drying off my body as I was cleaning it. It's okay, I tell myself. You deserve it. It's Silkwood shower time, baby.

There's a light rap at the door. I freeze, towel half-way wrapped across my hips.

"Hey, Harris?" Seb's voice is tentative, and this is it, I think. This is him come to end things, because that was so not cool of me. Liam. I acted like a Liam. Even if Seb doesn't think so, I *know* so. The whole cajoling someone until they do something dumb with you? That's a Liam move. I never want to be like that again.

"Harris, are you okay?"

I finish wrapping the towel and open the old wooden door, hand

clutching the crystal knob. "Hey," I tell him, trying to look way more at ease than I actually am, "I'm all good. What's up? Are you okay? How was the shower?"

Seb blinks. He's wearing one of my shirts and his boxers from last night. It's so cute on him, which sucks, because I know he's here to break up with me. His devastating attractiveness is not going to make him breaking off things with me any easier.

"Um," he says, blinking once more as if he's still attempting to process all the words that just spilled out of my mouth, "shower was good. And, I'm okay. Are ... are *you* okay?"

I wave him off. *Fine, I'm fine.* "I'm good, don't worry." I just feel disgusting and perverse is all. No big deal. Very normal. I am very good.

"Okay.... Can we talk?"

My heart thumps in my chest. I know what this is. I know what's happening. I can't say I blame him—I pulled a completely dick move. A Liam move. If I could go back in time and tell myself to break things off with Liam, believe me, I would.

"Yeah." I take a second to exhale, then smile at him. This is okay. This is good for him. "Yeah, sure."

"Cool, cool."

His curls are still wet enough that they're plastered awkwardly against his skull, a few ringlets curling against his temples and forehead. His skin has been scrubbed, like mine, but he smells weird. It's my shampoo and body wash, I realize. Citrus shampoo, sandalwood body wash. Having my scents on him, so familiar yet so different, is somehow disconcerting.

Why am I focusing on this right now anyway?

"Living room?" I suggest, sticking an arm out to awkwardly guide him, as if he somehow doesn't know where the living room is. God, Grandma is probably going to kill me for fucking this up. She really liked Seb.

Seb simply shrugs, and I follow him out to the living room. We sit at opposite ends of the loveseat, turned in towards each other. I feel awkward sitting on the couch in nothing more than a towel, but oh well.

"I'm really sorry about the quarry," I tell him. I don't want him to think I'm just apologizing because he brought it up. "That wasn't cool of me, and I really don't want you to think that I'm the kind of person who pressures someone else into doing something stupid. I would never want to—"

"This isn't about that," Seb says.

"Oh." Oh?

Oh?

Then what the fuck is this about?

My nerves turn into something a little more unsure. "What is this about then?"

"I guess I wanted to check back in with you," he says slowly. "We've been hanging out—well, fooling around, really—for the entire summer. It's been over a month, and we have just a little over a month left here. And I just wanted to know what you think of this ... whatever it is we're doing. Like, your thoughts on the future and everything."

His gaze keeps locking on mine, and then he'll spontaneously break eye contact. It repeats again and again, making it difficult to gauge exactly what it is that he's thinking about. "I'm ... not sure," I admit. What does he want me to say? I wish I knew, I really do. "What are your thoughts?"

Seb shakes his head, then pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes shut tightly. "I just wanna know *your* thoughts. Don't ask me what I want. What do you want?"

"Seb, I...." I trail off, throat tight. I don't know what he wants me to say. This is completely out of the blue. Why now, of all times?

"Harris," he says, "what do you want me to be to you?"

And I realize, there's no way I can answer him honestly.

Fuck. I am not on a winning streak today.

chapter thirty

[image]

sebastian

Harris isn't saying anything. Why isn't he saying anything?

He looks stumped. Dumbfounded. Water drips from his messily dried hair, and I refuse to let myself look at his broad, bare shoulders. He purses his lips, thinking.

I can't take it for very long. "I just want to know how you feel. What you're thinking."

"I know," he mutters, avoiding my gaze. I wish I could crawl inside his head and figure out exactly what he's thinking. I *like* him. I know this. But, if he doesn't like me back, then there's not really anything I can do, is there?

I wasn't mad after the quarry. I was just incredibly grossed out, not to mention concerned. But once I showered, I felt fine, if not a little guilty, because Harris seemed more upset than I did—probably *because* I seemed upset. I just needed to get all that manky lake water off me before I could pretend I was in the mood to smile. Jumping in the quarry is gross and I never need to do it again, but there. I did it. Cool.

"It's ... it's seriously up to you," I tell him. Okay. Okay. No more needling him. Gotta stop. Gotta let him make up his *own* mind.

Harris rubs the back of his neck. "I really don't know, Seb."

Oh.

My heart doesn't sink so much as it straight-up crashes, burning all the way from my chest down to my stomach. What does he *mean*, 'he really doesn't know'? What? Did I get my hopes up too far? Is that it?

I don't think my facial expression has changed. God, I hope it hasn't. But, seriously, what am I to him? What is this?

"What are you thinking, Seb?" he asks, his gaze pleading. But I don't know. For a split second there, I could imagine some sort of a future for me and Harris. That maybe I like him more than just friends with benefits, and maybe he likes me back. But there's no way he does. Harris has been a terrific friend, and I hope I haven't let him down in turn. Still, though. This is all we can ever be, isn't it? Simply friends with benefits, and nothing more.

And what would even be the point in trying to date? I'm leaving for Dartmouth at the end of August, and Harris is probably leaving even before that. We'd have less than two months together, and then bam, long distance. And I hate the idea of long distance. Could we even last like that, with how physical we are? Don't get me wrong, the physical intimacy is great. But it does not a relationship make. So this ... this is for the best, isn't it?

It's good to know this now. Set yourself up for success by planning for failure. That's what my dad always said when I was a kid, and look at me now. I don't need a boy in my life. And I especially don't need Harrison McCammon, no matter how great a distraction he may appear.

This would not work out. This was *never* going to work out.

I'm just glad I asked.

"Seb?"

"Nothing," I tell him, smiling. It's probably not a very convincing smile, but that's not the most important thing right now, is it? "I'm good."

"So...?"

"So?"

"Why did you bring it up?" Harris asks slowly, his gaze searching. "Are we okay?"

I swallow. My throat is tight. Painful. "Harris, we are *fine*. I just wanted to know what we were thinking for the rest of the summer."

"So ... do we want to keep on being friends with benefits, then?"

Fuck. Fuck. This ... this just sucks. I know that Harris doesn't see me as *only* being my body. He's made that point clear; I'm not stupid. Yet the idea that he only wants me to be his friend with benefits hurts. Because, I'm good enough to be his friend, and I'm good enough to have sex with, but for Harris, I guess I'm simply not good enough to date.

I should say no. That would be the smart thing, wouldn't it? Just say it: *No, Harris, I need time to heal from this, because this is a new kind of rejection, and I need to recover from feeling as if I've lost you, because I can never have you like I want to. So, very sorry, but I cannot afford to make out with you and do other things, or else I might cry. Heavily. And snottily. Thank you for your understanding! Enjoy the rest of your lonely summer!*

I can't bring myself to do it, though.

Even though I feel betrayed, just the mere thought of Harris' hands in my hair and his soft lips pressed against my own makes me weak in the knees. There's simply no way I'm going to shut this down right now. I can't.

"Yeah," I tell him half-heartedly, "friends with benefits works just fine."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." Yes, Harrison, because I'm going to phase you out. Slowly, piece by piece, I'm going to spend the rest of the summer getting over you before I absolutely *have* to let you go.

—

I'm back in my truck, alone. The first thing I do? Call Saanvi.

She picks up on the fourth ring. For a minute there, I was worried that she wasn't going to, so when I hear her confused, "Hello?" I'm

flooded with relief.

"Hey," I say, "what are you doing?"

"Um, I was spooning with my good buddy, Mr. Heating Pad."

"Oop. Sorry for interrupting."

She groans, probably stretching. "You're *gooood*. Why, what's up?"

"I did it. I brought things up with Harris."

There's a thud on the other line. A thud, and a quiet, "*Owwwww,*" quickly followed by a, "WHAT THE FUCK, SEB? How did it go?"

"It was ... well, okay. It didn't really go how I wanted it to go." I peel out off Harris' street, which is only a few blocks from mine. I could probably walk to his house in under ten minutes, but I like having my truck with me. The weather today suits my feeling perfectly—the sun is bright, and far too hot. But the storm clouds gathered threateningly in the distance have come ever closer. I give the rain an hour, max.

"Oh no, Seb. Babes. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay!" I insist, way too fast. I all but yell it into my truck's BlueTooth speaker, which isn't exactly as chill as I'd like for it to be. I clear my throat. *Take a breath, Seb*. This time, I speak slower. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yeah. I'm good."

"Wanna come over?"

My parents will probably be wondering where I am, having not heard from me in over twenty-four hours, but honestly, I don't care right now. I'm an adult, for crying out loud. I can be trusted on my own for a day or so.

"Sure," I tell her. "I'm going to keep you on the other end while I

drive, though."

"Okay." There's more shuffling, probably her either getting up to get dressed, or getting comfortable. "Give me the motherfuckin' tea."

I exhale. "Okay, so, we had sex last night."

"I'M SORRY, WHAT?"

"Saanvi, calm—"

"DO NOT TELL ME TO CALM DOWN, MY BEST FRIEND JUST HAD"—she whispers this next part, like someone might be listening —"*sex*? SEB. SEEEB."

"Yeah, I—"

"How was it? Was it amazing? Did you like it? Did it hurt? It's supposed to hurt for girls. Did you do it more than once? Did you use protection? Protection is important, regardless of—"

Here we go. "I liked it. It was great. It did hurt at first, but he took it slow. We did it ... more than once. Yes, we used protection, because we know that it's important, even for same-sex couples. You really sound like a sex ed teacher sometimes, you know that, right?"

Saanvi ponders this for a moment. I can picture her nodding approvingly. "Okay. Good. So ... you had sex."

"We had sex," I confirm. "Good sex."

"And then...?"

I sigh, turning away from my street and heading to Saanvi's. The speed limit is twenty-five, so the green trees on the slides of the road aren't exactly turning into vibrant blurs of color around me, but I admire the leaves nonetheless. "Okay, so, we went to Lake Franz today to go swim."

"Ew, Lake Franz?"

"I know. Shut up." I sigh again. I can't help it. "Okay, so, we go swimming in there, and then some fish touches his foot, and we decide to go look out on the quarry instead."

Saanvi hums in response. I press on.

"And then, out of nowhere, he decides to jump in the quarry. I—"

"That is actually so stupid. Please tell me you didn't." I keep my mouth shut tight. She takes my silence as an answer. "SEBASTIAN!"

"I'm sorry! It, just, *he* jumped, and then *I* jumped, because he had been all like, 'I just wanted to have this experience with you,' and I'm like, 'Aw wait, that's sweet,' and the debate team did it last night so it's not like we're the only crazy people, and then yeah, we just, we dive in together."

"That's so dangerous, Seb. Those waters had a pH of nearly 11, six years ago. It might be even worse now. Like, what were you thinking? Do you not remember sixth grade science?"

My hands grip the steering wheel tighter, tight enough that my knuckles begin to whiten as my fingers furl against the leather wheel. I slow down for a stop sign and wait for a few little kids biking across the crosswalk, their dad in tow. "Yes, Saanvi, I remember sixth grade science."

"Then why did you jump?"

There's silence. Because, I really don't know. "I guess I just wanted to do something fun with him. Keep the good vibes going."

"You are such a fucking simp. That ... wow. Okay."

I sigh for a third time, pressing the gas and returning a wave from the dad following his kids, fake smiling through the windshield. "I know, Saanvi, I know."

"Please tell me you showered."

"Yeah, I showered, don't worry."

"Good. Let's hope you didn't catch some deadly disease."

"Yeah." I know it won't happen, but having introduced myself to the possibility of catching some kind of sickness *is* admittedly worrisome. But there's nothing I can do about it now, so I'm just going to choose to pointedly ignore this fact.

"So, you go for a dip in the Gorge of Fecal Death and Bleach. What next?"

I'm turning onto Saanvi's street, and suddenly, I'm fighting back tears. "Okay, so." My voice is strained. "We go back to his place, shower separately, and then I knock on his mom's bathroom door and ask him what he's thinking about us."

Saanvi sucks air through her teeth, quite audibly.

"And he says he doesn't know, asks me what *I* want, but I'm kinda like, uh, no, this is your decision, and then he asks if we can continue being friends with benefits." I catch my breath, blinking just fast enough so that I don't actually start crying, although it's growing harder and harder by the second.

"And what did you tell him?" Saanvi asks. I pull up along her front curb and exhale, although my hands don't lose their grip on the wheel, taught and white-knuckled against the leather.

"I told him that was fine."

"*Seb*."

The first tear leaks out. Then the second. And just like that, I'm crying—sobbing, even—and I can't stop for the life of me. I heave for breath. "I know."

There's a soft knock on my window. I look out, and there's Saanvi, dressed in her set of pink bunny pajamas, her eyes soft, her lips pursed. Her phone is in her hand, and I hear her speak through the truck speakers.

"Come inside, Seb."

I nod and unbuckle, slamming the truck into park and shutting off the engine. Here. Here, I'm safe. Here, I'm known. Here, I can finally admit how I feel ... and cry.

chapter thirty-one

[image]

harris

I barely acknowledge Mom when she walks through the front door, although the pet carrier in her hand piques my interest. I'm wearing my same sweatshirt from last night and flannel PJ bottoms, wrapped up in a blanket on the couch. I feel weird. Wrong. Discombobulated, one might say.

Mom stares at the TV and puts the pet carrier on the ground, her brow furrowed. Then she looks at me. I stare back at her for a second before turning my eyes back to the screen.

"What's wrong?" Mom asks. She's wearing one of her nicer tops, a flowy boho kind of blouse that Grandma and I bought her a few birthdays or Christmases ago. Her hair is down for once, and I'm surprised to see that she doesn't look quite as tired as usual, even though I'm pretty sure she's not wearing makeup. (Although I'm usually bad at guessing that, gotta say.)

I turn to my back so that I'm facing her properly. "What?"

"What's wrong?" she repeats, crossing her arms and leaning against the front door to shut it. Her hand slips behind her and locks it, and then she's right back there, arms crossed.

"Nothing is wrong," I tell her, even though things do not feel right. But I don't know why they don't feel right, so it's not like there's anything I can do about it. "Why would something be wrong?"

"You're watching *Finding Nemo*," she says, nodding at the TV. "Spill the beans."

I sit up straighter, mimicking her arm folding. "I'm sorry, how is *Finding Nemo* indicative of something being wrong?"

"Because," she says slowly, "you only watch this freaking movie when you're sad and want an excuse to cry."

"What? No I do not."

She sighs. "Yes, Harris, yes you do. You watch this, or *Dumbo*, or *Brave*."

"To be fair, *Brave* always makes me cry. So if something was *reeeaaally* wrong and I wanted to cry, I'd be listening to Merida say, 'I love you, mummy.' But I'm not, am I?"

"Fine then," she says, something like disappointment or sadness flashing momentarily in her eyes, "don't tell me."

"What's in the crate?" I ask her, just so we don't have to talk about this anymore.

She looks down at it, her eyebrows raised in surprise, like she somehow forgot it was there. I can see a blanket poking out from between the wired gate. There's definitely something in there.

"A puppy," she says slowly. "His name is Peaches."

"Peaches is not a boy puppy name."

"Um, fuck you, you sexist pig? I'm the mom, and I say Peaches."

I'm sitting up at full attention now. "Well, can I see Peaches?"

Mom rolls her eyes at me, but she grants my request, stooping down and opening the crate door. "Are you awake, bobo?" she whispers. "*Awe you sweeping*?"

"Ew. Please don't baby talk the dog."

She turns her head to glare at me. She totally gets that expression from Grandma. "Again. I am the mom. Fuck you."

"What if we just call him Bobo instead of Peaches?"

"This is *my dog*, not yours. And I say Peaches, goddammit."

Then she reaches inside the crate and pulls out a very much awake, golden-furred puppy.

"Oh my god," I say, "why is he so cute?"

He really is. He blinks slowly at us, turning his head to take in the living room, then yawns, his little puppy fat rolling in my mom's hands. "Why on earth did you buy a dog?" I ask. No way this was a good decision. And my mom usually makes *only* good decisions. "I'm leaving soon. Who's going to take care of it?"

Again, another Mom Glare. "This was a gift from a coworker and a friend," she says slowly, bending to set Peaches on the ground with a sigh. "I'm off the night shift starting in August. It'll be regular old nine-to-five for me before you're even gone."

I stand up. "Are you kidding me? Mom, that's *amazing*."

"Thanks, hon. Dinner tonight? To celebrate?" she asks, finally smiling.

Peaches waddles over to me. "Fuuuuck yes!" I look down at the puppy in front of me. "Sorry. *Frick*, Peaches, *frick*. Swearing is bad."

Mom sits down on the couch. "So. What did you get up to while I was gone?" Before I can answer, she adds, "No partying, right?"

"No partying," I assure her, before bending down to scoop Peaches up in my arms. His fur is unbelievably soft. "I don't think I'm gonna party anymore this summer, honestly."

"*Really*?" she asks, observing me with a cool, motherly side-eye. "Or are you just saying that?"

I get why she'd question if I meant it or not. I've never been the type to just say things to get her off my back—she knows that. But I also have never completely shut down my partying. I just ... I really don't feel like seeing anyone. My closest friend was Liam, and now, I have Saanvi and Seb. What else could I need? Being everyone's friend in high school was awesome, but kind of exhausting. I like this much more. "Believe me, I'm all good."

Mom sits there, watching me stroke the silky soft fur next to Peaches' ear. "What happened at that party, baby?"

I glance up at her. It's like I can feel myself about to throw up all over again. "Nothing," I promise/lie.

"Are you sure about that?" She leans forward, grabs the remote, and pauses the movie, right as the seagulls begin to shout *MINE MINE MINE*. "You know you can tell me anything, and I won't judge you, right?"

My insides are heating up. My skin itches. I want to tell her. But I also don't know that she *won't* judge me. What if she thinks I'm an idiot for not casting Liam away beforehand, when there were so many red flags, alongside her many, repeated warnings and expressions of hatred directed toward him? The last thing I want right now is an "I told you so."

My fingers feel frozen stiff again. She'd be so disappointed in me. Disappointed in me for drinking a dangerous amount. Disappointed in me for not being more cautious. Disappointed because I didn't do anything to try and stop it, because I should never have been friends with Liam in the first place, because I didn't do anything that should make her proud to have a fuck-up like *me* as her son.

But then, she asks it. "Who hurt you?"

Peaches nuzzles his wet nose into my fingers, then licks my knuckles. I have to force myself not to jerk my hand away, just keep stroking him instead. My throat feels all swollen up. "I.... No one, Mom."

We both know I'm lying.

"You don't have to tell me," Mom says. Her voice is soft. "But know that, if you do want to tell me, I'm here. I'm listening. And I'm here to help you with whatever you need, Harris."

I'm fighting back tears now, forcing myself to stare at only Peaches and his little wagging tail. "It was...." Do I want to tell her? Should I? What the best course of action is here, I couldn't possibly tell you.

I swallow the lump in my throat down. It's painful. "It was Liam."

She sucks in a sharp breath but says nothing. Her silence is enough to let me know she wants me to continue.

"That night Evan punched me in the face, Liam tried to...." The words still feel so strange on my tongue. But I've already started. His name has already left my lips. There's no going back now. "He tried to assault me."

"Did he get ... all the way?" Mom's voice is sharp. "You have to let me know if he did, honey."

"He didn't," I assure her. "My friends Saanvi and Seb stopped it and brought me home. I was a mess, so that's why Seb stayed the night."

"So that boy who was leaving was Seb?"

"Yeah."

"And he stayed to keep an eye on you overnight?"

"Mmhmm." Peaches snuggles into the folds of my sweatshirt, pressing his forehead against my stomach while his tail wags so hard, his butt wiggles along with it.

She sighs. "I wondered if something like that had happened, but I figured you'd come to me about it when you were ready, and then ... you just didn't. I'm sorry. Thank you for telling me, honey."

"Yeah, of course. No problem." Tears prick the backs of my eyes, but I refuse to cry now. My nose is threatening to run as well, and I really don't feel like having a big, snotty cry land on this cute little puppy.

But one tear does leak out, and then Mom is reaching out, pulling me into her. Peaches scampers off my lap. "Come here," she mutters, squeezing me tight against her like she used to when I was really little. "Are you okay? Do you want to see a therapist? File a report?"

"I don't want to file a report." I haven't even thought about it, but ... yeah, that's not what I want to do.

"Why?" Mom asks. "Honey, there's no shame in coming forward. Women aren't the only ones who face assault, but either way, you're not alone."

"No, I just, is there really a point?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just don't see anything big coming from it," I tell her. "Like, it can't be a long sentencing, even if we can prove he did anything, and I feel like it would be more hassle than it's worth. I don't feel like being gaslit and spending a bunch of money, just so Liam can have his name on a list, best case scenario."

Mom's gaze is steady and even. "Are you *sure*? You don't have to decide right now, although sooner is probably better."

"I'll take the therapy. But I don't want to file anything."

"If you're sure...." Mom says, trailing off. "It's your choice, baby."

"It's okay. I'll be okay," I promise. "Besides, Evan Miller—*Neil's* son—and his friends apparently kinda beat the crap out of him. After Saanvi kicked the shit out of his elbow. So I feel like he kinda got his."

Mom's mouth is a tight line. I can tell she doesn't necessarily approve of all of this, but you know what? She's right. This is my decision. And I've been feeling a lot better about it.

"Can we talk about something else?" I ask her.

"Sure," Mom says. "So, are you and that Seb boy dating?"

Oof. That one hits a little different right now. "Um, not exactly."

"You're using protection?"

Ugh. "Yes."

"Okay. Well, I still want you to come in and get an STI screening soon, just to make sure you're protecting yourself and this Seb,

okay?"

"Why can we not have normal mother-son conversations?"

"This is very normal. I am doing a very good job. I think."

"You would." It sounds snarky, but I can't begrudge her this. Not when there's been such a weight lifted off my chest. I didn't realize how much this hurt—not telling her. I mean, she's my mom. I want to tell her everything, even when I can't. Keeping this to myself was too much. But it's done. It's done, and I'm okay. I'm going to be okay. My throat hurts, it's so tight, and the backs of my eyes are on fire, but I'm okay.

I smile at her. "But yeah. You're doing a very good job, Mom." I hope that, right now, she can feel the unspoken words I've just said. *I love you.*

chapter thirty-two

[image]

sebastian

Saanvi lets me cry for as long as I need to. Which, for me, was only a minute. I'm not a very long crier, which is probably a good thing, although I'm a very ugly crier, so it kind of balances out. On the plus side, I also got to cuddle with her cat, Honeydew, so at least there was that.

My parents have yet another book club, so we decide to head over to my place, before Saanvi's parents get home. We like her parents, but I don't need them to see me like this. Saanvi offers to drive, but I tell her it's fine, that I'm fine, even though I feel like there's broken glass laced around my stomach lining. She's being oddly silent, which is unlike her. Usually, if something goes wrong—anything, anywhere, ever—Saanvi is ready to go out like fucking Rambo, guns a-blaze. But ... she's quiet.

It's so weird.

"Hey, Saanvi, is everything okay?" I ask, turning onto my street. Fresh lawn clippings cover our sidewalk; I know I'll be forced to rake that up later. But, as expected, Mom's Honda Pilot is gone, likely parked in front of one of two coffee shops on main street. I don't think today is wine slushie day, but I don't even know. I'm on Summer Brain right now. Summer Brain Seb doesn't have to know *anything*.

Saanvi is typing away on her phone, her thumbs angled slightly different than usual now that she's finally been able to grow out her nails. In high school, we both always had to keep them short for orchestra. Her hair dangles in front of her face, shielding her expression from me. For the first time in years, it's like I don't know what she's thinking.

"Saanvi?" I try again.

She sighs, smoothing the half-curtain of dark waves back behind her ear. "Sorry," she says, offering a small smile. She's wearing her little thin librarian glasses today, the ones she usually only wears when we're taking an exam, or she has a headache. And, really, I feel bad. I've probably made her already-sucky day even shittier. Dragged her down into the bottomless pit of shitty despair alongside me.

"You're good. Well. Uh, *are* you good? You're just being really quiet."

"No, it's"—she sighs again, which, okay, so not great for my anxiety —"sorry, I'm just out of it today. But I wanna be there for you. So let's go eat ice cream and be anxious, sad bitches, okay?"

I manage a slight smile. My lips, so tender and swollen just this morning, are now dry and chapped. "Okay. Yeah. Yeah, cool. Ice cream it is."

She walks up ahead of me, stalking across the lawn-clipping-laden cement, and I'm a little surprised that she doesn't want to walk side by side. Oh well. It's fine. No big deal. At all. At least watching Saanvi walk so pissed-offishly towards the front door like that, all while dressed in bunny pajamas, is a little bemusing.

Saanvi leaves the door open for me, kicking her shoes off and immediately walking over to the couch. She flops down on it, grabbing a throw blanket and tossing it over her shoulders. Her hair is in front of her face gain, but she doesn't seem to give a single fuck whatsoever.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Oh my god, I will actually slap you around so vigorously that you shit your pants. Now get me some motherfuckin' ice cream, Krause."

"Headache, food cravings, melodrama? Spooning with Mr. Heating Pad?" I set my shoes on the mat, where shoes go. "Is this day two of your period?"

The glare she shoots me confirms that, yes, this is indeed the start of the much-dreaded Saanvi period. Saanvi has really rough periods

—"leave school doubled over in pain" kind of periods—so I pull the shades shut and say, "I'll bring out the ice cream."

"And two spoons."

"And two spoons."

"Thanks," she mutters, reaching for the remote. "Love you."

When I'm back with the ice cream carton and two spoons, Saanvi and I nibble away in complete silence, the blanket wrapped around her slumped shoulders. When we've both clearly had our fill, I put the carton back, and we resume our movie with Saanvi's head on my lap. We're a good half an hour into *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* when Saanvi says, "Hey, Seb, do you think—"

The front door opens, and in walk my parents.

Mom notices us in the middle of slipping off her short green jacket. Her eyes go wide with surprise as the door swings shut behind her. "Oh, hi, honey. Hi, Saanvi."

Saanvi sits up, a little too fast to look normal. Her cheeks are flushed slightly. She grabs her glasses from the coffee table and slides them back on her nose, then clears her throat. "Hi, Mrs. Krause, how was book club?"

I want to shake her for that sus reaction. I don't get the chance.

Dad opens the front door and steps in behind Mom. He's wearing that stupid cap again, the one that makes his hair stick out like a clown's wig around his ears, and its ultra-conservative, uber-dickish red making his skin look simultaneously flushed, as well as jaundiced. His skin is even more tan today, a concerning spot darkening on his forehead seemingly every time I see him. Mom keeps urging him to get it checked out, but he's too stubborn to listen. It's like he refuses to see what's in front of him. Like now, when he sees me and Saanvi sitting close on the couch, both of us quite obviously embarrassed. Saanvi's usually well-kempt hair is a little frizzy from where her head was laying on my lap.

I have a feeling that this is about to be another one of those times

where my dad doesn't see what is really in front of him.

I watch him take us in, then Mom's unwarranted surprised face. "Sorry, Seb. Are we interrupting something?"

My fingers itch to pause the movie. I can't handle having two things go on at once, and I know my dad is about to try to turn this into a Conversation, the kind where he talks to me about me and Saanvi, except *this* time, it's going to be him attempting to set up "boundaries" for the both of us because we're obviously in a heterosexual relationship. Obviously.

And just, with the day I'm having, I *really* can't afford that kind of stress. But I at least have the dignity to wait, my shoulders tensed back, jaw set, teeth clenched, waiting for him to say it, because he can't not. He's my dad.

"Don't worry," I say, trying to seem nonchalant. I *am* nonchalant, at least in regard to simply watching a movie with my platonic girl best friend. But the knowledge that this is likely about to take a deep downhill spike is stressful in and of itself. No matter what, I can't act like I have a reason to be upset. "You're not interrupting anything."

"I'm so sure," Dad says, bending down to untie his stupid hipster boots. Seriously, how old does he even think he is? "Listen, do we need to have a talk with you and *Sahnvi*"—right, said as if she's not even there in the room with us at this exact moment—"about respecting this house?"

Mom at least has the self-awareness to look absolutely mortified. She turns to him, mouth open, *clearly* about to say something, but Dad cuts her off, because he has to. He's Dad. "We've allowed you to sneak around behind our backs. God knows why, I just figured it was something with *Sahnvi's* parents being stricter than we are."

Next to me, Saanvi bristles, but stays silent. I'm not liking where this is going.

And of course, Dad has to continue. Because he's Dad. "But if you two are going to be getting handsy on the living room couch, then I

—"

"We weren't getting handsy," I tell him. My voice is stuffy, from all the ice cream, yet itchy, thanks to all the crying. After everything yesterday, last night, and today, I am beyond exhausted. "We were just watching a fucking movie, Dad. Ask Mom."

"Really, honey, they—" Mom starts.

"You'll watch your language in my house," Dad warns, pointing one stubby finger at me. "You might think that you're a man now, that you're all grown up and mature because you have a girlfriend and you're moving out soon, but—"

Oh my god, I can't anymore. I just *can't*. "How many times do I have to tell you? Saanvi is *not* my girlfriend, Dad." My voice is raised. I stand up, accidentally knocking the remote off the couch in the process. I don't care to stoop down and pick it up just now though. My blood is fire-hot. My fingers are rigid, half-furled; it's like my brain can't decide if they want them in fists or relaxed.

"We don't believe you, Seb," Dad says. "It's obvious. And we're fine with you dating! We—"

"No, Dad, there's nothing that's 'obvious,' or nothing to be 'fine with.' I'm gonna say it one more time: Saanvi and I?" I frantically gesture between the two of us. "Not together. And we're never going to be together, okay? Never in a million freaking years. So, just, give me a break for once, okay? I don't get why you're so insistent about this."

Dad's face has gone from olive-toned-but-jaundiced to straight-up red, matching his cap. "Because!" I see a vein in his neck. He's about to get mad as shit. And you know what? Good. Fucking do it. I wanna see it. "I don't understand what's wrong with you! You're a teenage boy! You guys spend too much time together to be 'just friends.'"

"What, so because I'm a guy, I have the uncontrollable urge to get with my girl best friend? Grow up, Dad." Even if I were straight, that would just be plain stupid.

"Well it just doesn't make sense! What's wrong with you? What, are you *gay* or something?"

The fire in my veins turns icy hot. It's like the world slows down for a moment. There it is. There it fucking is. That's what my dad thinks is "wrong" with me. If I'm this close with a girl I'm not dating, I must be broken. And that kind of broken is being gay.

"Honey?" Mom's voice is shaky. "Honey, please, just stop. Sebastian, please something."

My eyes itch. I'm going to fucking cry again. Jesus Christ. Great. I find myself shaking my head. I close my eyes. The soundtrack of *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* is a warbled mush in my ears, Nina Simone's *Sinnerman* sounding faint and too slow.

"Sebastian," Dad says. His voice isn't shaky. It's gruff. Angry. And maybe, just maybe, a little scared. "What is wrong with you?"

And that's what does it. Not "are you gay," but "what is wrong with you."

"You know what, Dad? You *really* want to know what's wrong with me?" I cross my arms and stand a little straighter, just to make it all the more obvious that I'm looking down my nose at him. And I hope he feels small when I say it, I really do. I hope he feels as tiny as I do right now in this moment, as miniscule and insignificant and wrong. But I hope he knows that he deserves it, because I know that I sure as hell don't.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

"I'm gay."

It feels as if the words tumble from my chest, sprawling across the floor in front of me. As soon as they're out, I want to take them back. But I can't. I wouldn't, even if it were possible.

No one says anything. In my peripheral vision, I can see Saanvi isn't even looking at me, she's just staring at the coffee table. Mom's eyes have gone wide, her lips parted in—what, surprise? Disappointment? Dad's expression doesn't change.

He's still angry. I should have figured.

"Get out," he says. He mimics my crossed arms. "Just, get out. Go for a walk or something. I don't want to see you right now."

"Joseph—" Mom starts, but Dad raises a hand and shakes his head.

"What, you don't want to see me?" My voice is so loud, it tears through my throat. It hurts. It hurts to shout like this. How does Dad do it so often? Practice? "What makes you think I want to see *you*?"

"I'll have your mother text you when you can come back," he says, suddenly at a normal volume, as if this gives him an advantage, "but for right now, I need you to get the fuck out of my house, because I can't bear to look at you. You're right, Seb. You're an adult now. Being here is a privilege, not a right."

My stomach feels like it's been spiked apart from the inside. "What?"

"You heard me," Dad says. "You can come back later, when we've decided what to do with you."

Panic rises in my chest. "'What to do with me?'" I echo. "What the fuck, Dad? You can't send me to conversion therapy or something. I'm eighteen. I'm on my own. Even *Dartmouth* is covered."

"Then all we have to offer you is a roof over your head, is that it? Is that all we are to you? People who are just here to clothe you and feed you and nothing else? Don't you care about how this will affect us? How we'd feel about this? You're just choosing to make our lives harder, when all we've done is been there for you."

"Dad, of *course* I care, but you—"

"Joseph—" Mom tries again.

"We'll let you know when you're invited back inside," Dad says. And it feels final. Because he's Dad.

But I'm mad. My insides are fizzing. I feel supercharged, vibrating so fast that I'm on the verge of shattering completely. "If you're

going to kick me out," I tell him slowly, "then say it. Say the actual words. You don't want your gay son around? You can't bear to look at him? Then fucking do it, Dad."

He shakes his head. "I don't want you *gone*, Sebastian, but we need to work out where to go from here."

"No, Dad, but it feels like you *do* want me fucking gone." My throat is tight. Painful.

"Language." He points at me again. "I mean it."

"You know what, Dad?" I'm never going to have the courage to say this again. "You're a fucking coward. A fucking sheep of a coward."

"All right." His voice is booming again, that vein in his neck popping once more. Red. He's all red. "You think you're such hot shit? Then get out. Get your shit, and get the *fuck* out."

"Joseph!" Mom cries, but Dad turns and shouts something at her that I can't even make out. Kicked out. He's kicking me out. Somehow, I didn't see him *actually* doing it.

Holy shit. I can't believe this. My insides are squeezing tightly shut. So I do the only thing I can think of—I run upstairs to my bedroom, tuning out my dad's shouting downstairs, and grab my pre-packed suitcase. I didn't think I'd be leaving the house this soon, but you know what? Fucking fine. So be it.

Mom's mouth is still agape when I come downstairs. "Sebastian, honey," she tries. I stop and give her a pointed look, waiting for her to continue. Or even for Dad to cut her off. But he doesn't, and she doesn't dare go on. She's completely cowed, and I can't even feel bad for her anymore.

I grab my truck keys from the coffee table and walk towards the doors, shoving my feet into my sneakers, tugging the backs out. "Come on, Saanvi, let's go."

"Where do you think you're going with my truck?" Dad says.

I look back at him. "*Your* truck?" We both know I paid for that truck

with years of filing papers for Dad's dental office, starting when I was fourteen. Sure, he helps out with the insurance payouts sometimes, but it's *my* truck.

"Whose name is on the title?" He crosses his arms. "Take it, and I call the police."

My heart sinks. Motherfucker. Fucking motherfucker. "Alright then, we'll just walk."

"Oh no," Dad says. "If *Sahnvi* wants a ride home, I'd be more than happy to give her one. In *my* truck."

Saanvi stands up from the couch, the blanket falling away and revealing her bunny pajama pants. It would be almost comical, if she didn't look so pissed off. "Okay, you know what, Mr. Krause?" she says. "You are a terrible father. And a disappointment to humanity."

She joins me by the front door, passing between my parents. Mom is crying, albeit quietly and minimally. "And you?" Saanvi says, and shakes her head. "I'm disappointed in you too, Mrs. Krause."

Mom doesn't wipe any of her tears away. Her expression is still unreadable. Conflicted, perhaps, if anything. "Sahnvi, I—"

"Don't apologize to me. Say it to Seb." Saanvi doesn't put her shoes on, just stoops down and grabs them.

She exits before me, and I give my parents one last hard look. "You don't have to bring a suitcase," Mom says weakly. A few thick tears roll down her cheeks. Is that remorse? Or just panic? "We just need some space to talk, just your dad and me. A couple of hours at most."

"Do you honestly think I want to be here right now?" I lift the suitcase over the threshold. "See you guys around." *Just certainly not tonight.*

Saanvi has her shoes on before I even shut the door behind me. When we start down the sidewalk towards her house, with me rolling my suitcase behind me, Saanvi in her bunny pajamas, I don't

cry.

I don't look back, either.

chapter thirty-three

[image]

harris

It's been a day since my first therapy appointment. Mom got me in really quick with one of the providers in the local clinic, one of the ones I know she goes out for brunches with sometimes. There was a cancellation, and she fit me in. It did feel nice, admittedly. Just the simple act of talking to someone about all the Liam stuff was ... cathartic. Which I guess is the point of therapy. I just didn't realize I was going to feel so much lighter after just one appointment.

The doctor, who said to just call her Nicole, was really upfront about it. She said that recovery is never a linear line, that it's more like the sea.

"Imagine an ocean at low tide," she said, pushing her RayBans up her thin nose. She was a thin lady in general, all skin and bones and cream-to-beige clothing. But with her relaxed posture and genuine smile, I didn't have much trouble opening up to her. Her presence was comforting. "The waves push and pull as the high tide comes in, but just because we see a wave recede doesn't mean that we aren't building to something more. Recovery is a process. Sometimes one step forward, two steps back. But you're going to get where you need to be eventually, Harrison. And it's okay to take your time. You don't have to feel perfect right away, but I'm happy to get you started."

When I left the appointment, I called Mom and told her I felt so much better that I didn't even know if I needed to go again. I seriously meant it, but Mom just laughed dryly and said, "Nice try. Same time next week. Now go let the dog out before he takes a piss everywhere."

Now I'm on the couch with said dog, snuggled against my stomach, which is adorable, yes, but also has me terrified to move—which sucks, because my mouth is weirdly sore, and I *really* need some

water right now.

Grandma is here too, sitting on the opposite end of the couch. She wedged a pillow between her thigh and my feet because she said my "mangy tarsals" were grossing her out. I would like to point out that she's simply overdramatic, because I have socks on. We're watching *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, because Grandma is old, and I'm a secret sucker for a good romantic movie. I'm multitasking—texting Evan Miller, of all people.

Me : No, seriously. I appreciate it.

Evan (track) : Don't worry about it. I'm sorry for punching you

Me : lol I kind of deserved it

Me : I'm so sorry for outing you

Evan (track) : Dude, you're good. Me and Rachel are chillin. It all worked out
Evan (track) : I'm most sorry for leaving you alone with Liam, honestly

Me : Dude, we've been over this. You were a big help. So thank you

Evan (track) : Anytime. We cool?

Me : We're def cool, dude

Grandma sighs at the TV. "I need me a man like that."

I look up at the screen, squinting. My phone goes face-down in my lap. "Huh?"

"A stud. I need a stud." She sighs again.

"Well what was Grandpa like?" I never knew him. He died a few months before I was born. No one ever really talks about him. (Which I assume is for a reason, but still, curiosity.)

"Your grandpa was an absolute dick. It wasn't early onset Alzheimer's. I *intentionally* forgot where we buried him."

"We only have one cemetery in town," I point out.

Grandma waves me off. "It's a big cemetery. Easy to get lost. Where's Frank? Oh, Frank? Guess he's not answering. Too bad, so sad. I'm too old to walk around a fucking cemetery all day to try and find some old fud's bones. If he's upset, he can wait a couple of years and see if I join him in that nice warm place. We can roast marshmallows while he tells me I'm a shallow bitch, and I'll happily inform him that yes, I absolutely am. And that my spite let me live longer."

"Remind me not to get on your bad side, Granny."

"See that you don't."

Peaches is asleep, which is freaking adorable, but also inconvenient because my phone is in my left back pocket, but I can't scooch forward enough to grab it without potentially waking him up. Things felt a little awkward with Seb after all the quarry bullshit yesterday, so I gave him last night to be by himself before caving and texting him this morning. I asked him how his morning was going at around eight-ish, and then sent one meme an hour later over Insta, and another two hours after that.

Not that I'm keeping track of how long it'll take for him to respond to me. No. Not that at all.

I slowly rub my tongue against the roof of my mouth. It feels like I ate a nettle or something, a painful burning that I don't think I've ever felt before. I smack my lips a few times, until Grandma turns to glare at me.

"What on earth are you doing, boy?" she asks, squinting at me.

"Sorry." Peaches stirs awake, which works just fine for me. I shift over and scoop him onto my stomach, already reaching over to the coffee table to grab my thermos. "My mouth is, like, burning. It hurts a fuck ton."

"Hmm." Granny moves the pillow and leans in. She pauses the movie, then curls her finger in a *come hither* motion. "Let me see the inside of your mouth."

Maybe other people might find that sentence strange. But my mom is a doctor, and my Grandma is nosy, so I came to accept my fate a long, long time ago.

I do as she asks, leaning forward and opening my mouth, sticking my tongue out and trying to angle myself so that she can find the best lighting. "Gimme your damn cellphone," she says. "And turn the damned flashlight on for me. You know I have no idea how all that newfangled bullshit works."

"I know you didn't just say 'newfangled,' Granny." But I pass her my phone, flashlight on. On my lap, Peaches yawns.

"Open your mouth."

"That's what he said."

She flicks me in the forehead for that one. I try not to laugh, and open my mouth.

"Hmmmm...." Grandma peeks around. "You've got some white patches in there, duckie."

"Ew," I say. My tongue is still sticking out, so it comes out all warbled.

"Pretty red in there too. Looks like thrush to me."

"Thrush?" Her diagnosis made, Grandma hands me back my phone. I turn the flashlight off and cock my head at her.

"Oral thrush," she says with a wave of her hand. "You just need some meds, duckie. It's the same kind of drug you use for a yeast infection. Some fungal bullshit, I don't know. Your mom's the doctor."

"Checks out." My tongue gingerly feels the roof of my mouth again. After a moment, I think I can taste a little blood. "So it's not bad?"

"Nope." Grandma sits back and unpauses the movie. Without so much as looking at me, she asks, "So, when did you go swimming in the quarry?"

My stomach sinks. "You can get oral thrush from swimming in the quarry?"

"Why do you think they closed it down? Put up a damned sign and everything. Can you not read? Or do you just choose not to?"

"I...." Fuck. Yeah, yeah, there's the sign. But I didn't think about it. Seb was right—we shouldn't have gone jumping in the quarry. "I chose not to read it. But I was only in there for, like, a *minute*, Grandma, believe me. I jumped in and then swam out super fast."

"Well, now you have oral thrush. I'll tell your mother to bring home whatever it is later."

"Fine." I sit back and cross my arms. "How ... how mad do you think she'll be?"

She pauses the movie again. "Harrison, what do you—"

"Not 'mad.' Like ... disappointed. Do you think she'll be disappointed that I went swimming in the quarry?"

Grandma shrugs. "She won't be impressed, that's for sure. But you're a kid. She used to go jumping in there when she was your age, and look, she's alive. A few of her classmates got oral thrush too. She won't disown you, that's for sure."

I sigh. "Okay, yeah. Cool."

She stands up, one of her knees popping. "Ooftah. I'll go call your mother. Let her know what a bad boy you've been."

"Ha ha." But all I can think of is Seb predicting this exact thing—asking how I'd explain to my mom that I ended up with oral thrush.

I check my phone. Still no texts.

I'm beginning to feel restless, in all honesty. Did I do something

wrong? *I just wanted to know what you think of this ... whatever it is we're doing.* Did I answer wrong? I might have answered wrong. I must have. And given that he hasn't texted me.... What did he want me to say?

Does Seb want more from me?

An hour passes, and Grandma and I have moved on to *Twelve Angry Men*. I'm still mulling over the lack of texts from Seb. Is this it? Did I fail some sort of test I didn't even know I was taking? The more I think about it, the angrier I get. So, what, he's just decided then? Unfair. Absolutely unfair. I'm not a mind-reader. Maybe, if he hadn't put it in such a vague way, I wouldn't have said *no* to wanting a relationship with him. Because, in all seriousness, I do. I have. From the beginning. For him to just decide this, in a completely one-sided fashion, is beyond just unfair. It feels cruel.

Don't I matter too?

chapter thirty-four

[image]

sebastian

I spend the next couple nights in the guest bedroom at Saanvi's house. We tell them everything—it was a little hard not to, showing up with Saanvi in tears and me hauling a giant suitcase behind us. We'd never been exactly sure how they'd take it, the whole gay thing. But Saanvi's parents were chill, enough so that they were happy to offer me a place to stay for at least the night. I could hear them whispering in hushed Telugu through the vents, a conversation likely about me that I'll never understand.

I can't get the look on Dad's face out of my head. What was that expression—disgust? Hatred? I'm almost too scared to give it a name.

Mom keeps calling and texting. I end up turning my phone all the way off, because I simply cannot deal with anymore of this today. I think that day was quite possibly the worst day ever, and I don't think I can handle any of that negativity today.

Saanvi comes in at about ten a.m., in a different set of animal pajamas (penguins this time), her hair in two frizzy pigtails. "Heyyy," she says, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. "Want some breakfast?"

My chest pangs, thinking of Harris asking the same question only a few days ago. I haven't had the heart to text him since. "Yeah, what's on the table?"

"Probably either Honey Nut Cheerios, or All-Bran. Choose wisely."

The Gaddam's guest bedroom is in their basement, but it's nothing like the basement in the McCammon's house. For one, there's carpet, not just an ancient shag rug thrown atop chilly concrete, and there's separation. One room is a bedroom, and the other is

Saanvi's mom's office, for her remote work. Something to do with engineering, I don't know for sure. Just, something smart.

"Are you doing okay?" Saanvi whispers to me as we both tiredly trot up the staircase. I'm in a pair of PJs I'd packed for the fall semester, flannel bottoms that remind me of Harris, and a wrinkled HOSA T-shirt.

I glance back over my shoulder. I want to tell her I'm fine, but my throat constricts and tears threaten, so I just flash her a small smile and shrug.

"This week has been really intense," Saanvi says. "I'd let you stay here till Dartmouth, but we're all flying to India next week, and we'll be gone for a while.... Oh! Maybe I can talk my parents into letting you watch Honeydew? A live-in pet-sitting situation? The seven-year-old next door will *not* miss out on her inadequate paycheck, believe me. I—"

"It's okay, Saanvi, but thanks." I don't actually know if it *will* be okay, but ... she's already done enough for me. I stop and turn on the final step. "And thanks for being my best friend."

Saanvi looks up at me. I'm usually about three-fourths of a foot taller than her, but right now, it's at least a whole foot. Her eyes have a slight shine to them. She sniffs. "You're *my* best friend. And I'm really glad you were having a better summer than senior year, Seb, I really am."

"Me too." And I mean it. Junior and senior year felt like dragging myself through hot coals on my hands and stomach, grasping to find purchase on the next hot stone that might allow me to pull myself just a few inches closer to success, to respite, to freedom. This summer had been the perfect change of pace, from that very first night when jumping into Lake Franz felt like a much-needed (and literal) leap of faith, to the night before last, when Harris and I slept together.

But it's different now. Wrong. Dad's kicking me out isn't the reaction I'd hoped for from coming out to my parents, but if anything, I do at least feel satisfied now. Satisfied that I was right when I told Evan I

couldn't come out. Like, look at that. I was right. At least I'm eighteen now. I'd be moving out in a couple months anyways.

It's okay. I'll be okay.

"Are you okay?" I ask her. "I feel like this summer has been one big existential crisis on my end. A happy one, but still. I feel like I haven't been paying a lot of attention to your needs. So I'm—"

"Shut up," Saanvi says. "You're my best friend. You're there when I need you to be, believe me."

"But you've seemed...." *Different* is the wrong choice of words, but I'm not sure how else I could put it. These past few days especially, Saanvi has been this less-sure version of herself, hesitant and withdrawn and prone to only small, sad smiles. I can't help but think that, even if it's not my fault, it's not *not* my fault for being more there for her.

Saanvi shakes her head. "It's just all ... it's all a lot, Seb. Your parents flipping out, everything with Harris.... I'm overwhelmed."

"Saanvi, I'm so—"

"No, but it's not just that. It's not *you*, Seb, it's seriously just me. We move out soon. We're heading off to college, and I'm not going to able to be there for you as easily, and you're not gonna be able to be there for me as much. It's just ... yeah. It's scary."

"I get it." And I do. Completely. "Knowing we're leaving soon is just, it's hard."

"Yeah." There's a slight sheen to her eyes. "I'm just, I don't even know. I'm so stressed. Everything is usually so easy. I just *do it*, y'know? You put it in front of me, and I do it. But now, I'm headed off to fucking Princeton, and I just *know* I'm not going to be exceptional there. And I'm excited? But it's also so scary. What if I can't get things done anymore? And then, I won't have you, or my parents, or Honeydew, and I'm just, I'm so scared."

Then she shakes her head. "Sorry, Seb, you're already dealing with so much. I didn't want to pile even more on your plate."

"Saanvi. Shut up." I pull her into a hug, my frame completely engulfing her. "For one, don't you ever act like you'd ever be a burden to me ever again. And two, you're exceptional everywhere. Even Princeton. You got in early admission. You're the smartest person I know. Someone puts something in front of you, and you get it done because you're such a fucking badass. Just because you're surrounded by other doers doesn't mean you're not the most badass one of them all.

"And, even if you *aren't*, you're still one of the most badass ones, so this just means you've found your people. You've worked so hard for this. You've worked your entire *life* for this, Saanvi. You deserve it. I know leaving Denton is scary—because, like, *believe me*, I get it—but, it's not going anywhere." I squeeze her tight, hoping she can feel just how much I truly mean this. "And neither am I."

"Seb," she whispers, then sniffs. And for the first time in a long time, Saanvi cries into my arms. I'm happy to hold her.

—

Saanvi's mom dotes on me at breakfast time, constantly asking if I want more veggie bacon, if I need another glass of OJ. Saanvi is obviously happy to have more options than All-Bran and Cheerios. Beneath the table, Honeydew weaves around my ankles. Saanvi's dad's nose is stuck in his newspaper, his cereal of choice today being Cheerios. He pays me no mind, the complete opposite of Saanvi's mom. I don't mind though. It reminds me of breakfasts at my own house, the ones where Mom has a stack of drawings to hand back to her kindergarteners, and Dad downs one last cup of coffee before he goes into the dental office.

Saanvi and I finish early, and her mom and I chat about college while I help with the dishes. It feels normal, for once. Even the best parts of this summer haven't necessarily felt normal, so I'm glad for the break in excitement.

And then the doorbell rings and ruins it.

After putting down his paper with an over-exaggerated sigh, Saanvi's dad answers it and seems a little surprised, albeit gruffly

so. "Jodie," he says cordially. "Have you come to see Seb?"

"Yes." Mom heaves a sigh of relief. "He's here?"

"I don't know," Mr. Gaddam says. "Depends on why you're here to see him."

"I just want to talk. Is that okay?"

I hear the door shut, and Saanvi's dad comes to the kitchen, his button-up shirt tucked into his work pants. He's got silver hair, slightly bald on the top, and a bushy grey mustache that has been this bushy (albeit less grey) since we were little. "Seb, your mother wants to talk with you."

I set down the plate I was rinsing soap off and pat my hands dry on my flannel bottoms. This is definitely awkward. "Sure thing."

Mom is standing on the front porch, wringing her hands nervously. Her expression is a mix of happiness and concern when I come out, shutting the door behind me. "How are you doing?" she asks. "You weren't answering your phone."

"I needed some space." Remembering what she and Dad had said, I add, "To think about what to do."

"Oh, honey. Please ignore your dad," Mom pleads. "We love you. I'm so sorry that he blew up at you. It wasn't right, and I've had a talk with him, and—"

"Mom, I–I can't just forget that." And it's true. I think I safely say that yesterday was one of the worst days of my life, if not *the* worst. "You don't have to pretend to accept me. I'd rather drop the pretense and save everyone's time. We can just—"

"Seb, I already assumed you were gay." She smiles. It's wobbly. Unsteady. I don't think I've ever seen her so frazzled-looking. Her brown hair has been tugged back into a haphazard ponytail, and her eyes are sunken, swollen, red. "I just didn't want to push you to say anything before you were ready. And I never mentioned anything to your dad, because I thought it wasn't my place, and ... well. You know your dad. And then, with Saanvi, I thought maybe I

was wrong, but just, I am *so* sorry, honey. All of that never should have happened."

"It's okay," I tell her. It's *not* okay, but maybe it's because I don't really want to fight, or because we both definitely look like we're about to start crying—I want this all to be okay. This moment. Just give me this moment.

"No, it's not." Mom shakes her head. "You didn't deserve that. And I'm so sorry that I let that happen to you. I should have been there more for you, and–and I might not ever be able to truly make up for that, Seb, but please know that I love you, and I'm never going to stop trying."

I may or may not be closer to crying now. "Mom...."

"If you want to stay with the Gaddams, if they're okay with it, then I'm okay with it. But you can come home, Seb. I'm so sorry."

I glance back behind me to the Gaddam's shut screen door. I'm not exactly sure what I should be feeling right now. I think I'm maybe emotionally overstimulated enough to the point that I'm bordering on complete apathy. But I manage to turn my gaze back to Mom and offer a tiny half-smile.

"I'll think about it," I tell her, then move to head inside.

"Your dad left this morning," she adds hastily. I stop, one foot behind the door. *What?* "We've been ... well. We've been arguing pretty hard over this, but I'm not backing down. He's staying with his parents to sort out his feelings, and then we're going to work things out. As a family. Seb, I ... I want you to feel safe at home."

"Why are you still with him then?" It comes out harsh. "Mom. Mom, he is *ridiculous*. I noticed it in the sixth grade. Didn't you?"

"Your father is entitled to his beliefs," Mom offers weakly. "He—"

"His beliefs are shit." Really hope the Gaddams didn't hear me cuss, but also, what-fucking-ever. I'm not wrong, so I press on. "And he doesn't respect either of us. And what right does he have to be on any kind of pedestal? He thought the freaking election was rigged.

He's an idiot. How was I ever going to feel safe at home?"

"I should have tried to ease him into it," she says. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't enough." I'm starting to feel anger bubbling up in my veins. "Mom, if you *knew* I was gay, how on earth could you let him get that bad? He's entitled to opinions, not outlandish fucking hatred. I have been on edge for *years*." I take in a deep, shuddering breath, and try again.

Quieter this time, I repeat, "For *years*, Mom. While you were out there enabling him, I ... I was terrified. I have been stressed, and I've been miserable, and just so, so unhappy. You weren't being loyal or considerate to either of us. You were too focused on being non-confrontational."

"Seb," Mom tries again. "I—"

"No, I want you to listen to me. If I come back—*if*, Mom—you can't let him talk like that. If you know he's wrong, or, like, you even *disagree* with him, you've got to do something about it, I swear to god. Or I won't come back. Ever."

She doesn't try to respond, but there are tears rolling down her flushed cheeks. If I weren't so angry, I might feel bad. We must look insane to neighbors—a middle-aged woman crying on the Gaddam's porch, a strange boy in his pajamas ranting to her, fueling her tears.

"I'll come home tonight," I offer slightly. "But seriously. Our relationship is in your hands now."

Mom nods. "Okay. That–that's fair. I'm so sorry, baby. I'll be better, I promise. I—"

"I'll see you tonight." And I shut the door.

chapter thirty-five

[image]

harris

It's been almost three days, and Seb still hasn't texted me back.

I'm not sure if I should be more concerned, or more angry. One little text shouldn't hurt. This ghosting out of nowhere feels uncalled for, but it's so unlike Seb. I keep thinking to myself, what if he's not okay? I keep thinking the worst. But then I go straight to thinking about him knocking on the bathroom door, asking me what I wanted to be, and then ... bam. Complete and total radio silence.

I've got the worst fucking migraine I've ever had, though, so I'm having trouble thinking about this whole thing reasonably. It's like my thoughts are cut up into little segments, and I'm trying to catch them in one of those tornado-money machines. Honestly, this is the worst.

I should have just told him I wanted to be his boyfriend. Then none of this would be happening. But, also ... if he's going to act like this—so non-communicative, out of the blue—maybe it's for the best that we're not dating. I rub my temples, as if trying to nurse my thoughts back to a better, happier place. It's not working.

I can't tell if I feel like complete shit because he won't text me back, or if it's the meds I have to take for this stupid oral thrush. My only break from all this Seb stuff was when Mom gave me this big verbal lashing, then explained fluconazole, *then* explained what I'm taking: Diflucan, which she is now amiably referring to as my "vaginal yeast drugs," which is so, so very appreciated. I can't believe I have to take this shit eight more times. I feel like death.

It's got to be past six a.m. now. I can see the sun beginning to peek over the top of my blackout curtains. Peaches is sound asleep at the end of my bed. Lucky bastard. For me, this has been another restless

night of no response from Seb, accompanied by a searing migraine and borderline IBS. Seriously, I'm practically shitting water at this point. I've never been so grateful for the fact that I have an en suite.

Because, truly: I. Am. Miserable.

It's the fucking Diflucan. It has to be. Even though Mom told me all of the side effects to expect, I still double-checked the side effects listed on WebMD, not entirely unlike a middle-aged mom who's convinced she has some kind of rare toe cancer, because I'm skeptical. Sue me. The upset stomach and headaches are expected. Maybe some nausea, some dizziness. If I'm really lucky? Hair loss. (But probably not.) (I think. My mom is the doctor, not me.)

I've taken my fair share of meds over the years. I was one of those kids who was too accident prone to be getting into everything, but did so anyway, and suffered the consequences. But these little dusty pink trapezoids of doom are just too much. It's not just my head, not just my stomach—my whole *body* aches. Is it supposed to be this bad? I feel like it's not supposed to be this bad.

I keep coughing really bad too. It's not a side effect of the Diflucan, and it's not a symptom of the oral thrush, but I also ran out of water to drink, so maybe that's why. Dry throat. Painfully dry throat. I'd refill my thermos, but I can't bring myself to drag myself upstairs and back down again. Just the mere thought of standing up right now is painful. I collapse into another coughing fit, so bad that I roll onto my side and practically convulse with each painful hack. My migraine is pounding. I might throw up. I cough again, and could almost swear I taste the coppery tang of blood on the back of my tongue, even though I know I must be imagining it.

Still. Maybe this requires a text to Mom.

My phone is next to my pillow, my notifications turned all the way up in case Seb *finally* responded to my texts. I can barely keep my eyes open—I seriously feel like fucking death, and tilting my chin towards my chest to text makes me realize how shallow my breaths are.

When I unlock my phone, it opens on my many unread texts to Seb.

The last being, **Hey, Seb, I caught oral thrush in the quarry. You called it. Just thought I should let you know. Hope you're doing okay!! Lmk if you need anything.**

I can't deal with this right now. I can't deal with *Seb* right now.

Besides, texting Mom time. *Focus, Harris*. I end up unable to text with perfect grammar, but it's not as if I care right now.

Me : hey mom i think im sick, could u bring more water n thermometer thx luv u

Mom : What's wrong? Do you think you have a fever?

Me : maybe, idk
Me : but i have a rlly bad headache and i keep coughing and if i have anymore diarrhea i will rip out my own colon

Mom : That's a nice image, baby
Mom : But ok, I literally just parked in the driveway, I'll be right down.

I hear the front door open. I've only just closed my eyes when another message pings on my phone.

Mom : Where is the fucking thermometer
Mom : Nevermind. Found it.

I hear Mom's footsteps as she rushes downstairs, but they're faint and whooshy in my ears. She flicks on my bedroom light, and my sore head silently screams in protest.

"Baby?" Her voice is so soft, and somehow, just hearing it soothes me. "Are you awake?"

"Mmph," I tell her, forcing my eyes open. My vision is blurred at first, until I blink it away. "Yeah. I haven't slept all night."

Mom brushes my hair away from my temple. "I'm sorry, baby. We'll get you all sorted out." I didn't know I needed to hear those words. Relief blossoms amidst the uncomfortable tightness in my chest.

She runs the thermometer over my forehead. I close my eyes again, waiting for that signature little *beep* that lets me know it's finished taking my temperature. I hear the beep, and the Mom sucks in a breath. She mutters something to herself, clicks her tongue a few times, and I realize she's retaking my temp. There's that beep again. More worrisome sucking in air.

"Fuck. Alright, get up. We're taking you to the hospital."

My head is swimming. I am pain. *The hospital?* "Why?"

"Because your temperature is 104 degrees, and we're not fucking around and finding out." Mom's phone is in her hand, and I know she has to be calling Grandma. Mom cusses when she doesn't pick up, but leaves a message. "Hey Mom, it's me. Harris is sick, so I'm taking him into the hospital. Can you come let Peaches out when you have time? Thanks in advance. Uh ... I'll keep you updated. Love you. Bye."

I try to get out of bed, but there's this sudden strange almost-squeezing in my chest. "Mom?" I ask. It's thin. I try to take a full breath and can't. Fuck. Okay. Fuck. "Mom, I'm having trouble breathing."

Mom is next to me in an instant. "Are you wheezing? Is there pain in your chest?"

I nod, trying my best not to cough in her face. Oh my god, I hurt. I hurt everywhere. My chest is suddenly squeezing tight, but not in that familiar anxiety way—it feels like something's winding up tight, behind my ribs. I take a gasping breath, trying to fill up my lungs. Somehow, it leaves me feeling even more empty than before.

"Deep breaths, baby," Mom says, placing one hand in the gap between my shoulder blades. "Can you stand?"

"I think so." I don't try, though. I'm too busy focusing on trying to catch my breath again.

Then I cough, strangely warm and phlegmy into my elbow. When I pull away, I feel faint.

There's blood there.

chapter thirty-six

sebastian

Dad and I aren't speaking, but it's okay, because Mom isn't speaking to him either. She told me that she'd reached the following decision: that if he didn't apologize, she was going to file for divorce. I'm not gonna lie—it feels selfish, but it's nice to know that I have someone on my side in all this.

Half of me wants us all to work it out. The other half ... couldn't care less.

It's the afternoon now, a mere four days after they gave me the boot to start off with. I wonder if Dad knows I'm back home, if that would enrage him enough to come back for a round two. Either way, I don't care. I'm just happy that, out of all of this, Mom is on my side. It's strangely relieving.

What isn't a relief? The amount of unanswered texts I have from Harris.

Turns out that turning off your phone when you don't want to answer your suddenly-estranged parents' calls to come back home *also* means you miss out on texts from your overcomplicated situationship. And I do feel bad. Wanting to phase him out seems so much more real—and so much more devastating—now that I've realized I've been ghosting him.

These past few days were just so crazy, and that last conversation I had with him almost feels like the kickstarter to one of the worst days of my life. Well, that, and that damned quarry. When I read his text that he has oral thrush, I almost feel bad, although I'm also a little stuck in feelings of worry for myself, combined with a strange *I told you so* kind of feeling. I can't say I'm proud of it. In all honesty, I feel like a complete dick. Because, even after I inadvertently ghosted him for almost three days, he still sends me a

text like this:

Harris : Hey, Seb, I caught oral thrush in the quarry. You called it. Just thought I should let you know. Hope you're doing okay!! Lmk if you need anything.

Like ... I seriously suck. This is not a good week for me. I've probably ensured that this wasn't a good week for Harris, either.

This is the point where I realize that, even if I'm somewhat upset about our friends-to-benefits thing is all Harris wants from me, even though I want more, I still can't just cut him out like that. Even my whole "phasing him out" wish feels stupid now. Harris doesn't deserve that. He's just a silly, stupid little dork boy. It's not as if he's ill-intended. Even if we can't be boyfriends—and, even if it would hurt—I still want to be friends.

Me : Damn, sorry to hear about your oral thrush situation. Let me know how you're doing, okay??
Me : Also, I'm sorry I haven't responded to your texts. I had a crazy ass week. I feel awful. Can I tell you about it in person maybe? Shakes at Paco's, on me?

I hit *send* and then sit there for a solid minute, just staring at my screen. Which feels sad. That's kind of sad, isn't it? It's not as if I can just expect him to respond immediately. Even *if* he was intentionally waiting on responding to me, it serves me right. I deserve it, after ghosting him for three days.

An hour into no response, I discover that I am a very impatient person. I try to distract myself—sorting the books I want to take with me to college in a box. Check my phone. No texts. Making a checklist of everything I still need to get for my dorm at Dartmouth. No texts. Strip the sheets off my bed and toss my bedding in the laundry and move my bed to the center of my room instead of up against the wall. No texts.

Four hours into no response, and I think my eye might be twitching slightly. I don't know, I'm probably losing it. Usually, Harris responds to me immediately. He must be really freaking mad at me to ignore me like this. Which just makes me feel even worse.

Did I ruin this?

I'm remaking my bed with warm sheets fresh from the dryer when Mom knocks on my doorway. "Hey, honey, you okay?" she asks, leaning against the doorframe. Her grey eyes are lined with worry. "You seem upset."

"I'm fine," I tell her, then hesitate. The moment I do, the sides of my comforter that I just managed to wrestle onto my mattress come flying up. Mom sighs, not in an annoyed way, and comes in wordlessly to help.

"Are you sure you're okay?" She tucks the sheet in with ease, pulling it more taut than I had had it, yet somehow managing to avoid it flying away from the mattress. "You can tell me what's wrong, Sebastian."

I want to trust her. I guess I've been bad with that—telling my parents things. At least Mom has shown that she might be receptive to listening to me. I've always avoided sharing with them, because it simply feels easier (can you blame me?), but maybe now is as good a time as any to try it out. If we're going to make this work, I've got to trust her. Probably. I'm just worried I'm going to discover a line, some kind of boundary I never would have been able to anticipate, and everything will go to shit once more.

I start it off with a sigh. "So I've been kind of seeing this guy," I tell her, hating that I immediately feel the back of my neck grow hot. "We're not really in a serious relationship, per se, but we're good friends. I don't think he wants us to be anything more, and like, I'm okay with it."

"Uhuh," Mom says, reaching into my laundry basket for the topsheet. "Ooooh, so warm. Sorry, sorry, honey, go on."

I can feel my blood pulse through my veins. Why is this so scary to me? And why am I surprised that she's handling this so well, after everything? "Well... I kind of ghosted him by accident. With everything that went down this week, I was super distracted and turned my phone off, and ... yeah."

"So are you worried you hurt his feelings then?" Mom asks, folding down the top of the sheet. I mimic her actions on my own side of the bed. "Or is it something else?"

"I mean, I just feel like a crappy friend, y'know? And also, he usually responds to my texts right away, but he hasn't, and it's been almost, like, five hours. So yeah, I don't know. I'm just really in my own head about it. I really, *really* like him, Mom, and I'm super worried that I messed everything up." I take a deep breath and try to smile, although it feels more like a wince. "Does that make sense?"

"Honey, that makes complete and total sense." Mom gives me her Teacher Smile, the one that's somehow simultaneously comforting, as well as wise. "Would it be appropriate for you to swing by his house, maybe? Ask to talk to him in person?"

The thought of confrontation, even with Harris, makes my stomach twist. "I don't know, Mom. He might want his space."

"I'm not saying you have to have a whole boombox moment from *Say Anything*."

"Still haven't seen it."

Mom rolls her eyes. "You know what I mean, though. Just go try to talk to the boy, for Christ's sake. It can't do any harm."

I want to tell her that, yes, it can *absolutely* do harm. "I don't want to push him to a place that makes him uncomfortable, though. If he wants space, then he deserves it."

"But how do you know if he wants space when you haven't actually talked to him?" She gives me a pointed look, and I hate that I'm thinking of Harris always checking in with me and seeing how I'm doing. I know that I shouldn't be giving up so easily. I *should* be checking in on him, too. He deserves it.

"Alright," I tell Mom, dragging my duvet onto the bed. "I'll go see him."

Mom helps me position the last piece of bedding, and then she

smooths it down, smiling up at me all the while. "You won't regret it," she promises, then turns to leave.

"Wait, Mom?"

She turns around. I wouldn't know she was surprised, if it weren't for the few sudden lines in her forehead. "Hmm?"

Another breath. This shouldn't feel so hard. "Thanks. For, um, for listening."

She nods, her smile slight and melancholy. "Anytime."

And the tightness in my chest loosens, if only slightly.

chapter thirty-seven

[image]

harris

There's nothing quite so fun as waking up in a hospital bed. "Mom?" My throat is raspy, sore. There's this weird, chilly tickling in my nose, but when I put my hand there to see what's up, I feel one of those little oxygen tubes, and the discomfort of an IV drip in the crook of my elbow. My eyes are attempting to adjust to the fluorescent lights when a deep voice comes out of nowhere.

"Harris?"

My eyes focus on a man in a lab coat and scrubs, holding a clipboard. He looks familiar, although I couldn't tell you why. He's just got this familiar nose. I can't explain it.

"Glad to see you awake," he says, grinning through a thick, bushy beard and crossing over to me. He's pale like Seb, although his eyes are a sharp, similarly familiar green. I feel like I've seen him around, but can't figure out where. "I'm Doctor Miller."

Ohhhh.

Puzzle pieces slide into place through my brain fog. Miller. Evan. Mom's coworker doctor guy. Maybe puppy guy friend? Interesting.

"Neil?" I guess.

He laughs. I don't know *why* he laughs, but it's deep and throaty, kind of like if Santa just kicked back a bourbon on the rocks. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Uh, yeah, you too. Why am I here?" I've realized that I'm in this hospital bed with little *The Fault in Our Stars*-style tubes shoved up my nose, wearing a hospital gown and all. "And where's my mom?"

"Your mom went to go home and grab a quick change of clothes,

and make sure Peaches was alright. She was still in her scrubs when she brought you here. Do you remember her bringing you here?"

I shake my head. After that blood in my elbow—which, oh god, never again, please—there's nothing.

"Well," Neil—*the* Neil, ohmygodwow—says, "you had a really bad fever. We ended up taking some blood and doing a sputum culture. You were somewhat awake at one point, and we took a urine sample too. When you were out again, we also took an X-ray."

"Well, with all that, I'm guessing you know why I'm here?" I can't see Mom leaving me alone if they hadn't figured it out. Still, all I can remember of this morning is fuzzy, yet concerning. Coughing up blood. Searing body pain, equally searing migraine. Using up nearly an entire roll of new toilet paper.

Instead of answering my question, Neil says, "So your mom says you went swimming in the quarry? Picked up a pretty standard case of oral thrush?"

"Yes." Damn that quarry. "Is that why I'm here? The oral thrush?"

"Nope."

I wait for him to say something else. "....Okay?" Does he know his son punched me? Is that why he's being weird? Because I thought me and Evan were chill.

Neil itches the edge of his beard. The scratching sound makes my nose wrinkle up, but I don't think he notices. "So, Harris, you've got Legionnaires'. It's not the end of the world. We found some infiltrates on your lungs, but nothing like an abscess or pleural diffusion."

"Sorry, but uh, doctor words don't make sense to me, Dr. Miller."

His smile isn't as tired as I'd have expected. "Just consider it severe pneumonia, Harris. When you went swimming in the quarry, did you choke on any water or anything?"

I think back to it. Jumping in. The just-right water. The spluttering

as I surfaced and tried to get Seb to join me. "Yes."

"Generally, this is something you'd find in say a hot tub or aerosol can," Neil says, finally stopping with the beard scratching. "It's really just breathing in contaminated water. We had a few other cases a couple weeks ago, all kids who had been in the quarry."

Oh shit. Could he possibly mean—"Elana Doorsey?" I guess.

"I can't share patient information. It's confidential." I don't know Neil very well, but it feels like a 'yes.' "Everyone seems to be making full recoveries, thankfully. There's about a one-in-ten chance of not making it, but you're all young. You should be okay."

If I felt like I could sigh right now, I would. "Really?"

"Basically, you'll have to stay here for a little bit, but if you're looking better after a week or so, you should be able to continue treatment at home. I'm guessing you'll be a-okay."

"Okay. Cool." This is all admittedly dizzying. Somehow, I feel like I'm dreaming, but ... ain't no way. I glance at the IV drip shoved in my arm, then back at Evan's dad. The ever-infamous Neil. (Again. Wow.) "I caught it from the quarry?"

"If I were a gambler, I'd place my bet on that, yes." He glances down at his clipboard. "You a smoker, Harris?"

"Not intentionally?"

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'"

"Yeah." It's more of a mumble than I'd have liked for it to be. "You should take it as a 'yes.'"

Footsteps approach in the hallway, and my chest squeezes tight. I want to call out *MOM?* and have her run in and hug me, but I don't want to seem melodramatic in front of The Doctor Neil. But then, there she is, rounding the corner in an oversized sweatshirt and jeans, and I nearly do call out. Her hair is still in its work ponytail, but her normally meticulous coils have unspooled a little bit, and the makeup on her cheeks and forehead is shiny from being on for

what's got to be over twenty-four hours.

Mom purses her lips. "Baby," she says, speed walking forward to hug me. I hug her back, even though the IV drip tugs my arm painfully. I still ache all over, but this is ignorable. "Oh, I'm so glad you're okay."

She pulls away from me and holds me by the shoulders. "Now, are you *ever* going to do something as stupid as swimming in that goddamn, motherfucking quarry ever a-fucking-gain?"

"Don't worry, I won't," I promise her, smiling. The migraine from this morning is a barely noticeable headache, and my muscle pain has largely dissipated. "And hey, look, I don't have any absences in my lungs."

Mom wraps her arms around me again and squeezes me tight. "*Abscesses*, you idiot."

There's a knock on the doorway. I look up and am surprised my eyes don't fall out of my skull. "Seb?"

"Oh, yeah, I brought your little boyfriend along with me," Mom says, turning to look back at him. "I was in the middle of changing, and he wouldn't stop ringing the fucking doorbell. I thought Peaches had gotten out of the yard again, and a neighbor was gonna get on me about it, and I was going to literally—y'know, nevermind. Not important right now."

Seb waves sheepishly. I can see the redness in his eyes, the slight wetness beneath his nose. "Hey," I say, my voice suddenly quiet. "Look who decided to show up."

"Harris, I am *so* sorry about ... well, everything. I can't believe I ghosted you like that." He walks up to the edge of my bed, next to my mom. He casts her a nervous glance for a moment, then focuses on me. "I had a ... really weird week. I promise, I can explain everything, but it's still no excuse for—"

"I don't care." I'm smiling. I'm smiling so fucking wide. Until I cough, but there's no blood, so hey. It's a painful cough for sure, but

then I'm right back to smiling. "I'm not mad. I'm just really stinking happy you're here, Seb."

"And *I'm* really stinking happy that you're okay." He shakes his head at me, his slight grin tired. "Are you going to listen to me the next time I tell you something is a bad idea?"

My laugh is raspier than usual. Not that I mind it. "Yes, Seb, I will listen to you the next time you tell me that something is a bad idea."

"Good." His brow furrows. "But, you're okay?"

"According to my new bestie over here, yes."

Mom glances between us. "So.... You've met Neil now, huh?"

"Yes. Now I know 'who the fuck' is Neil."

"Well...." Mom bites the inside of her cheek. I already know what she's about to say. She has to realize that. It's painfully obvious. If my throat weren't so sore, I'd be laughing right now. "Baby, Neil and I have been seeing each other the past few months. I'm sorry you guys couldn't meet under better circumstances."

I shrug. "I kind of figured. What kind of 'friend' gets their 'friend' a puppy?"

Doctor Neil snorts. "Yeah, okay, yes, fair."

"Well, now that that's out of the way—" Mom starts, but I cut her off.

"Wait, Mom, this is Seb. The one who you—"

"The one who I saw leaving at seven a.m.? And then drove here just now, after he nearly broke down the door? Yes. Hi again, Seb. Pretty sure I went to school with your aunt."

I meet Seb's gaze and take a steadying breath. "Well, Seb is my ... boyfriend?" I try to let him know—with my eyes, which is harder than it sounds—that this is so completely his choice. But ... I like

Seb. Like, like-like-like-like him. And I'm not going to play this inadvertent game of cat and mouse anymore. If he doesn't want to be my boyfriend, then so be it. But I'm not going to pretend that I don't feel this way.

He doesn't say anything. Fuck.

Am I being pushy again? This is just like the quarry all over again, isn't it? Fuck. I need to stop pulling this—

Seb's face cracks open in a big, wide smile, so wide that it hides one of his larger freckles in a smile line crease. "Yep," he says, and just like that, I'm smiling too.

Mom ruffles my hair. "Nothing like making things official in a hospital bed, huh, kiddo?"

"That obvious?" I ask. Almost-laughing causes a tight, painful stirring in my chest, so I try to ignore the urge.

"Very obvious," Doctor Neil says. "But hey, thumbs up. Approval."

"Yeah.... Thanks, Neil." I fight off the urge to turn to Mom and ask her, wide-eyed and innocent, *Is Neil my new daddy?* I'll probably whip it out later, like our first weird dinner together, me and him and Mom and Evan. Oh, yep. Perfect. That sounds good.

"Alright, well," Mom says, "I think me and Seb should go grab some dinner. You didn't have any kind of allergic reaction to your levofloxacin injection, but let Neil know if you have any vaginal itching. Well, more so than usual."

"Ahaha. You are so funny."

"I'm *hilarious*." She tightens her ponytail. "Alright, Seb, let's grab some Culver's, and I can tell you embarrassing stories about my son."

"Ooh, my favorite," Seb says. He gives me one last smile before he leaves, mouthing *I'll text you* before he follows Mom into the hallway, disappearing quickly. I hear, "So I heard about the mushrooms...." before they're out of earshot.

"Well.... Nice to meet you, Harris," Neil says, then leaves hurriedly as well.

I just smile, leaning back into the starchy hospital pillow and closing my eyes.

All in all, not a bad turnout.

chapter thirty-eight

[image]

sebastian

"'Bed rest' is a little bit extreme, me thinks," Harris says, crossing his arms across his chest. He's currently in bed, resting, propped up by the pillows wedged between him and the wall. "I feel great. Fantastic. All good, all betterer. Let's play some fuckin' Parcheese, am I right?"

Granny Mac stands next to his bed, a bowl in hand. "This is boiling hot soup, duckie," she says. "And I *will* pour it over your dingle-dongle if you try to get out of bed."

"Well why don't I just eat the soup first, and then get up? Seems kind of obvious."

"Oh, Harris. I'll just make more boiling hot dingle-dongle soup."

"Oh, Grandma. I'll be *long gone* by then."

Her head swivels slowly toward me and Saanvi. Her eyes are slits. Her lip is curled in disgust. Her sweater reads, *If I'm sittin', I'm knittin'*. "I can't do this anymore. He's all yours."

As she walks toward the stairs, a bowl of boiling hot soup left on the bedside table, Harris calls out after her. His voice is still slightly raspy. "Noooo, come back. I neeeed you. Gwwwaaaandmaaaa."

"Okay, I don't care how bad your cabin fever is. 'Gwandma' makes me want to commit homicide," Saanvi says, walking over and sitting on the edge of Harris' bed. "So how was having a shitty-ass disease? Is hospital food as bad as they say it is? Or were you unable to eat solid food? Or was it, like, a weaning-you-into-it kind of situation? Were there hot nurses? Were they mean?"

Harris blinks at Saanvi. His track sweatshirt is wrinkled, his hair an

uneven, poofy mess. There are bags under his eyes, slight enough that you might not notice them if you *didn't* consider staring at Harrison McCammon's face to be your calling in this life.

"Wasn't it just technically an infection?" Harris asks. "Seb?"

I snort and walk over to the opposite side of the bed, sitting down. The mattress shifts underneath me; I have to stick out my legs so that I don't slide off onto the cold concrete floor. "What are you asking me for?"

"You're literally a pre-med," Saanvi says, her previous interrogation already forgotten. "Don't you get off on knowing if it was an infection?"

Harris grins, tugging my sleeve. I am seriously regretting wearing the *Blues Clues*-esque striped shirt. I feel like the ultimate dipshit. "Yeah, Seb. C'mon, tell us. We know you're getting off on knowing. Now you just have to work on getting off on telling us!"

"The only thing I'm *getting off* of is this topic of conversation."

"You love it. You know you love it. Doesn't he love it, Saanvi?"

"Yeah, no, he's deffo getting off on this too."

I groan. Saanvi and Harris both mimic me, each just as exasperated as the other.

"Anyways, I can't stay long," Saanvi says. "I have to get going home. Flight to catch, all that jazz."

"Oh my god." Harris grabs her forearm, clutching her through her open button-up as if his life depends on it. "You *have* to take all the pics for me."

"I will, I will." She tries to brush his hand off. He grips harder.

"I mean it. I wanna feel like I'm *in* India. Not in Shittystankstankland, Minnesota, stuck in bed for the rest of frigging eternity."

"Yeah, okay Harris."

"Panoramas. Can you get drones or something to do three-sixty degree shit? Is that a thing? Nevermind. Just, if you have a really really really tall cousin, make them pretend to be a drone. For me. As I am stuck in bed, for who knows how long. Maybe forever."

"Okay, Harris."

"If you don't ... I will find you."

"I'm sure."

"And I will kill you."

"Yep, there it is. Kill me? From your bed? With those lungs? Fat fucking chance." And, as if on cue, Saanvi's phone starts blaring *Cold Cold Man*. I remember when she changed her ringtone to that, way back when we were eighth graders who were just given our first phones. We'd found Saint Motel the same way we'd found most of our music—John Green movies. They had a track on the *Paper Towns* soundtrack, and we haven't looked back since.

"Fuuuuck," Saanvi says, then picks up. "Amma? Yeah, I'm coming. Just on my way out." She gives each of us a quick side hug and waves bye as she walks out of the basement, telling her mom something in Telugu that at the very least makes *her* laugh. Her footsteps creak about upstairs. The closing of the front door is audible, even over Granny Mac blasting the Doctor Who end credits theme.

And then, it's just the two of us.

"Hey," Harris says, "come closer."

"Um, how about *you* come closer." But I'm already edging my way toward him, leaning in slightly.

"Can't."

"Why not?" I stop short just a few inches away from him, so that we're face to face, not to mention tantalizingly close. His breath is

minty-fresh. There's a stray eyelash on his cheek; I have to force myself not to reach out and brush it away with gentle fingers.

He seems pale. Maybe that's just the result of not going outside much the past few days, or it's my imagination. But his lips are still a pinkish red, completely kissable, albeit a little chapped. Not that I care. Not that I would ever not want to kiss him. *Especially* over something so petty as chapped lips.

"Because," Harris whispers, the tender quietness of his voice drawing me in, "bed rest."

"I'm going to kiss you now," I tell him in my own hushed whisper.

"You'd bett—"

He doesn't get to finish. I'm too busy shutting him up—pressing our lips together, feeling the immediate warmth our contact sends rushing through my body, pressing in harder. His hands find my jaw, the sides of my face, tugging me in closer to him. I fumble, nearly falling off the bed again, but making up for it by getting completely on. I cup the side of his face gently, letting my other hand dig into his side through his duvet cover.

It's not a very long kiss. I'm terrified he'll run out of air and faint and die and then I'll have killed my boyfriend, which would definitely suck. When I pull away, he's not gasping for breath at least, so there's that.

"Woah," he says, and fuck, his voice is doing that *stupid* deep thing again. "That was pretty gay."

"Yeah, well, there's plenty more gay stuff where that came from."

"Oh yeah? Such as?"

"What are the odds of your grandma coming downstairs?"

Harris grins. "Didn't she tell you? She's taking Peaches to the dog park." As if she somehow heard us, the front door shuts once more. "See? And, Granny Mac and Peaches quality time usually lasts well over an hour, so...."

"There's a lot I can do to you in an hour."

"Oh, really?"

"Mm." I trace my lips against the side of his jawline. He tries to hide it, but I still hear him suck in a breath. "You've had a rough week."

"So have you," he argues. "Seb, you don't have to—"

"Harris, I want to do this for you." And I do. Harris let me cry into his arms about everything with my dad—who still hasn't come home—when he was still in the *hospital*, for crying out loud. And after I'd (kind of accidentally) ghosted him, too. "You deserve it."

"Well ... I guess if I've been a *good boy*...."

"Do you want me to call you that?" I ask him, reaching under the covers for the waistband of his shorts.

"No, I'm all good on—oh my God, Seb, your fingers are *freezing.* Are you even alive? Are we sure?"

"Shhhhh." They're not *that* bad.

"No, really, are you undead? That might be kind of hot. And explain a lot."

"I'm just deoxygenated, Harris. Jesus Fucking Christ."

"I'm not buying it. Are you.... Oh, fuck, Seb." I don't have to look under the covers to see what I'm doing to him. It's more fun to see it register there, on his face. "Fuck, fuuuck, Seb."

I give him a kiss on his neck, firm enough to where I feel him shiver and twitch, but soft enough so as to not leave any sort of visible mark. "Is this good?" I ask.

"Yes."

Told you so, I want to say, but refrain.

Of course, Harris doesn't refrain from adding, "I'm getting you hand

warmers for Christmas." It comes out a breathy sigh, not quite a moan but definitely not a whisper. "You little carcass boy."

Oh, come on. "Harris." It's sharp, an obvious warning. My hand stops.

"Sorry."

"Like, what the fuck."

"Yeah, I hear it."

I shake my head, removing my hand. "I don't know if I can go on anymore...."

"No, please, good sir," Harris says, and it only sounds half-mocking. "I need your touch. I crave your body, your soul, your leathery man palms. I feel as if I do not feel your grippers on my *banana*—" He stops to snort, and I roll my eyes. "Good Sebastian, why, I feel as if I should *perish*."

"Harris...."

"Yes, Good Sebastian?"

"You're not helping your case here."

"I'll start crying. I will. I'll do it."

"Oh my god, you are so fucking melodramatic." But I press a kiss against his neck and resume my movement. I feel his throat vibrate against my lips when he groans.

He sucks in a breath. "Sebastian...." His voice trails off, and he shuts his eyes.

I kiss his jaw again, feeling the slightest bit of stubble. It's scratchy against my lips. Somehow, the thought of Harris with a beard is ... well. It's sending me. "Harris," I whisper back, watching his eyes flutter shut.

"Don't stop," he begs, chin tipping back. "Please."

"I won't," I promise. And I don't.

The 'boiling hot' soup goes cold.

chapter thirty-nine

harris

It's close to midnight when there's a knock on my window.

Seb is wrapped in my arms, and I know he must feel me tense up. I can't help it. I legitimately can't. My lungs are already squeezing up, my breath shallow. There's enough light coming from the crack in my bathroom door, the lights left on, for me to see Seb's head shake as he stirs.

"Harris?" he murmurs, groggy. "Hey, Harris?" His hands find my forearms. Immediately, he rubs circles against my skin. I try to loosen up, to say something, but can't. My voice is gone. My very breath, stolen.

His voice has a little more surety to it as he wakes up. "Hey. Hey, it's okay," he says. "You're okay. What is it?"

I don't respond at first. I'm still tense, on edge while trying to listen for something. Anything. There's no additional knocking. Did I imagine it? Am I going crazy?

I must be.

"It's nothing. Go back to sleep," I whisper against Seb's ear. His curls tickle my nose, but I don't mind it. He smells like my shampoo and bodywash once again, and feeling him in my arms, bare skin on bare skin, is comfort plenty. Having him here is enough to keep all the bad vibes away. That night when I laid on my floor and drifted off to sleep while Liam knocked incessantly at my window? Yeah. This is what I wished I'd have had then.

He rolls over and pulls me into him a little bit more, tucking his chin over my head. "Alright," he mutters. "If you insist."

I close my eyes and try to soak in the warmth of his body against mine. My shampoo smells better on him than it does me, but I'm not complaining. My next exhale carries tension with it. My limbs loosen comfortably, and I snuggle in against Seb's chest a little bit more.

There's another knock. A few raps, in quick succession. And I know I'm not imagining it this time, because I feel Seb tense up too.

"Did you hear that?" he whispers, no longer groggy. His hands are suddenly tight on my forearms, so tight that it almost hurts.

Fuck. "Let's just ignore it." *Please*.

His thumbs slide up on each arm, pressing down to feel my pulse. "Harris, your heart is racing." His voice is strained. He's worried. I don't want him to worry. I just want us to fall back to sleep and never speak of this again.

"It's fine."

"It's *not* fine." He presses a kiss to my forehead. I inhale shakily. "I'll deal with it."

He slides out of bed faster than I can sit up. "No!" I hiss, terrified to shout even though I want to. I know why he was so worried—I can feel my pulse beating so hard, it feels like it's going to burst right through my neck.

"Seb." My voice is desperate. Strained. I think my hands might be shaking. "Please don't."

He's bending down, grabbing his cyan shirt and slipping it on. His hair is matted on one side, his silhouette golden-lit by the warm bathroom light. "Is it Liam?" he asks.

"Seb, I–I—"

"Is it Liam?" Seb repeats, coolly. I'm not used to this tone of voice from him.

I find myself at a loss for words.

"Right," he says, "well, I'm fucking done with his bullshit. Stay right there."

His gaze flicks about the room, until he settles on my metal water bottle. I watch as he picks it up, in his crumpled shirt and boxers, feeling the bottle for heft.

"Why do you need a blunt weapon?" I ask. Sinking. My insides are sinking. I am sinking. *Don't do this*, I want to tell him. *Let's just go to bed and ignore him. He won't break in. Probably*.

What's scarier than the thought of Liam forcing his way through my window is the thought of him leaping in after Seb opens it. As if he'll take it as some kind of vampire-style invite.

The solution is simple: just don't. open. the window.

I climb out of bed, following Seb the few paces to the window. He's holding the water bottle in one hand, already raised as if he's expecting to have to bust in Liam's head any second now. I put my hands on his flexed bicep and try to silently tug him back to the bed. But it's no use. All I get is him lowering the water bottle ... and pulling open the closed blinds.

I try not to yelp when I see Liam there, half-lit by the light from my room, the rest from the full moon outside, crouching in the pebbles and weeds of my window well. One arm is still in a cast, barely visible beneath his stupid fucking 6ix9nine sweatshirt he's had for too long, the one he didn't see an issue with keeping. He doesn't seem all too shocked to see Seb. I see him smile, a twisted, too-toothy grin.

I sink more.

Seb flicks on the standing lamp in the corner, right next to the window. I try to blink away the sudden shock of fresh light. I don't think I'm breathing. I'm frozen.

He slides the window open a crack—I try not to shout again but *why would you do that*—and says, "Get the fuck out of here, Grande." His voice is threateningly soft.

"I'm not here to talk to you," Liam says. "I'm here for *Harris*." His hand darts forward. Fingers wrap around the window's edge. Is it bad I want to bash the window shut on his fingers until he lets go? And then lock the window? And then never leave the house, ever ever ever again?

Liam tries to slide the window open, but Seb's arm is surprisingly rock-steady. "I just said to get the *fuck* out of here, Liam."

"Oh, fuuuck you, Krause," Liam says. His chin juts out. His expression sours. "Fuckin' crazy-ass closet case. This isn't about you, asshole."

"I'll make it fucking about me," Seb warns. "You've got five seconds to climb your sorry ass out of that window well, or I'm going to beat the shit out of you, and then call the cops."

"Yeah..." Liam says slowly, "*you're* gonna beat the shit out of me. Okay."

Seb holds up the water bottle. My heart thuds in my chest. "I'll bash your fucking head in with this. And I can, too. Wanna bet I won't? Minnesota Stand Your Ground law."

"Harris," says Liam, looking past Seb to me. He probably sees that Seb's a lost cause. "I just want to talk."

"You always 'just want to talk,'" I say, surprising myself. I didn't expect that out of me. Not right now. "We're not friends anymore, Liam. You're lucky I didn't file a police report."

"Over what?" He cocks his head. "We were just fooling around."

My next breath is shaky, just like my hands. "I told you *no*."

"C'mon, Harris, I—"

"I said, no."

"Harris." He tries to yank the window back. It gives an inch before Seb yanks it right back, twice as hard. The finger-bashing I had wished for nearly happens, but one of them stops it just in time.

And suddenly, I wish I was the one holding the water bottle, because there's this sudden furious rage boiling in my veins. It's red and it's hot and I'm mad. I'm done. Fuck this guy. Fuck. This. Guy.

"Fuck you!" I say, no longer caring if I'm speaking above a whisper. I'm speaking so fast that I feel like I'm going to trip over my words, but somehow, don't. "Forget Seb, Liam, *I'm* gonna be the one to bash your fucking head in. And I don't even like this shirt. I don't mind splattering your brains all fucking over it."

"Oh, come on, Harris, we both know—"

"You don't know anything, dickface. Now get the fuck out of my window well and the fuck off my property before I call the fucking police on your fucking bag-of-bones ass."

Liam doesn't say anything for a moment. He's frozen. He clearly wasn't expecting this.

"Harris, I—"

I snatch the water bottle from Seb's hand and hold it up. "You've got five *fucking* seconds, you fucking waste of oxygen. Five."

Liam's brow furrows and his lips purse, as if he's trying to figure out what he can say to get out of this. Like he always does. He's looking at me as if he has no idea who I am, as if he's never seen me before. And you know what? Good.

"Four."

He's still staring. Seb's knuckles are white where he grips the window. I can see veins in his forearm I have seriously never seen before.

"Three."

His mouth flops open and shut, like a gobsmacked fish. Which, good.

"Two."

I clench the water bottle tighter. I don't want this to get physical. I just want him to leave. But I'm also angry. Viscerally angry. I almost wouldn't mind taking that out on him—I don't even want to know all the times I can't remember where he took something out on *me*.

"One."

He takes a step back, still crouched. His expression warps into this angry, twisted thing that makes me feel like he's trying to set me on fire with his eyes. Hated. I am hated.

Good.

Liam takes his hand away from the window—and then punches it.

Okay, but ... what kind of fucking idiot punches a window?

Seb and I are both laughing before the pain even registers on his face. Before Liam can even properly process our laughter, Seb slams the window shut and clicks the lock back into place. I flip Liam off as I shut the blinds.

"I am so not sleeping tonight," I mutter, low enough so that only Seb can hear.

"Um, yeah, me neither."

We stand by the window for the next twenty or so minutes, long after we hear Liam's footsteps scrape as he somehow manages to haul himself out of the window well with one good arm. We whisper to each other the whole while, as Seb stands behind me and puts one arm around my shoulders, the other across my stomach, pulling me close to him.

"Take a shot every time you dropped the eff-bomb in one sentence," he murmurs. It's close enough to my ear that a small wave of shivers are sent racing down my spine.

"Sorry, is that too big boy of a word for you?"

"For me? No, I'm quite loquacious. I love big boy words. But for Liam? Definitely."

"Okay, well"—I turn my head back to peek at him, chin tilted up slightly—"what about *you*, Mr. Minnesota Stand Your Ground Law? That's not exactly your vibe."

"Well, funnily enough, what *is* my vibe is knowing that Minnesota doesn't actually have a Stand Your Ground law." He presses his face into my hair. "I don't care, though. That prick deserves a couple knocks in the head."

"Right? Jesus. What an asshole."

"What an asshole."

We stay standing like that for I don't know how long, until we've decided that Liam is definitely gone and not coming back. We cautiously crawl back into bed and meet up at the very center of my mattress again. Seb wraps his arms around me, pulling me into him. My face is pressed against his chest, this time so tight that I can't breathe. I don't mind it though. It's nice to be here with him, I won't lie. Being in his arms like this is enough to slow my pulse down, to even out my breaths. My jaw unclenches. Fists unfurl. I exhale.

"Are you okay?" he whispers after a couple minutes of hugging me in silence.

"I'm okay," I promise. "Shaken, but ... yeah. I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." I sneak a quick peck underneath his jawline. "Are *you* okay? That had to have been scary for you too."

"I'm fine, believe me. I should have beat him up." His hands slide across my back, moving in sweet, senseless circles.

I find myself smiling. "Eh, I know Evan and his friends beat the shit out of him. If he ever comes back, though, we should turn into a human potato."

"I'm imagining what that could mean? And ... I'm intrigued, but scared?"

"We need to read *Dexter* together."

"Ew, no thanks." He sighs. I feel my head rise and fall with his chest. "I don't like blood."

"I'm sorry to break this to you, Seb, but you're pre—"

"I'll learn to cope later. That's Future Doctor Seb's problem."

I want to say something flirty about him in a lab coat and navy blue scrubs, but something about being here in his arms, after all the adrenaline from before has dissipated, I'm suddenly exhausted. All I want to do is sleep.

It only takes a few seconds for me to drift off, I guess, because Seb nudges me awake. He's gentle, but I still startle. "Sorry, sorry," he whispers quickly. "Did you fall asleep?"

All I can give him is a sleepy, "Mm."

"I'm sorry," he says, his laugh a breathy chuckle. "You wanna sleep?"

"Mmm."

"Alright." He adjusts himself just slightly, then presses another tantalizingly sweet kiss to the top of my head. "Let's sleep."

In his arms, it's easy.

epilogue

[image]

sebastian

I'm sitting on my bed at home, leaning as comfortably against the wall as I can. The blanket Harris got for me as a going-away gift is around my shoulders, having freshly accompanied me on my flight home. Saanvi is chatting away, her face taking up the entire computer screen. "It's so barbaric!" she says, but she's smiling. "I hate having to kill the lab mice."

"Uh, Saanvi, I'd believe you if you didn't sound so invigorated by it."

"Whaaatever. Fine. I really do feel terrible, though. They're, like, my children."

"Not helping."

"Whaaaaaatever." She pulls the top half of her hair to put up in a ponytail. She cut it chin-length a week before she left for college. Her mom thought it was an abysmal decision, but it looks good on her. Really good, even still, as it is now, all the way down to her shoulders. "How's being home for Thanksgiving? There much snow yet?"

"Just a few inches," I promise. "Believe me, you're not missing out on much right now. It's still in the upper twenties most days."

"Yay." Saanvi's tone is dry. "I am so excited to come home for nearly an entire month to experience the worst parts of a Minnesota winter. Joy to the world."

I hear her phone buzz in the background. She checks it and drops her half-way finished ponytail. "Fuck, I forgot I was supposed to meet Dev downstairs. Friendsgiving awaits."

"Um, hot scientist boyfriend awaits?"

"Um, hot *engineer* boyfriend awaits, thank you very much." She drops the ponytail and floofs out her hair, pouting into the camera. "How do I look?"

"Soooo sexy, girlfrand. Yaaassss, oh my *god*. Slayyyy."

"Yay, ahhh! Okay, okay, okay. I have to go, but please tell Harris I say hi and that I miss him! Your mom too! Okay, okay, okay, BYE! I love you forever and ever and ever and ever and...." Her voice trails off as she shuts her laptop lid, until I'm left on my own in the Zoom. I leave the meeting and stretch. It was about time for me to get going anyway. I have to go pick Harris up.

There's barely any snow still left on the roads. Most of it melted, the only bit left of it being the gutter sludge. There's a thin layer of snow and ice covering everyone's lawns in town, but it's okay, the grass was all dead anyways. Harris' lawn is no exception.

I've barely even put the truck in park when he's racing out the door, wearing a red MSU Moorhead Dragons sweater underneath an open jacket. He waves ecstatically, running up to my window instead of the passenger side. Obliging him, I roll down the window and lean out.

Harris' hands find my cheeks, and my face tilts of its own accord, so our noses don't smush together. I've missed the feeling of his fingers in my hair—even now with thin woolen gloves—and the slightly minty taste of his lips from when he's just brushed his teeth. Then he pulls away, cutting the kiss way too short, and beams up at me.

"Hey there," he says, dropping his hands onto the door.

He looks good, even better than when I last saw him—FaceTime does *not* count. His hair is longer, a little floppier, but I like it. His new friend on campus, Emma or something, got him into face masks and shit, and his skin is practically glowing. He's wearing khaki pants, typical "Harris dressing up" wear. I can't believe he's here, right in front of me. Months of FaceTimes and late evening calls in different time zones don't seem real now.

"I missed you so much," I tell him. After all this time, I'm still unsure

of what to do with my hands.

Harris grins. Fuck. I've missed his smile. Not to mention that little dimple on his cheek. I want to trace his smile lines with the tips of my fingers, feel the softness of his skin crease as he smiles into my hands. But I just unlock the doors and watch as Harris races around to the other side, jumping in. As soon as I've shifted the truck into gear, our fingers are lacing together, our forearms resting on the center console. He turns up the same Fruit Bats CD that's been living in my truck since the summer before senior year, and I'm only slightly surprised that he sings along the whole way to Paco's.

—

Some weather is better than other weather when it comes to milkshake weather. Today is one of those days—sitting right around a toasty thirty-five degrees, just warm enough that woolen gloves and jeans are enough to get you by. Harris is wearing a red Moorhead crewneck under his jacket; I'm wearing the infamous track sweatshirt. I'm also wearing a hat, because fuck the winter. He brought me a spare pair of those cheap gloves you find every year at Walmart starting in November. The cheap fabric scratches my skin; I try to fit my fingers in them all the way, but they're too short. Still, I don't mind, especially as Harris grabs my hand in his, and we begin our snow-filled trek up to the quarry's edge.

Harris is a few steps ahead of me, holding back branches for the both of us every now and again. I step gingerly on the footsteps he leaves behind him, doing everything I can to avoid getting snow in my own shoes. Thin layers of snow crunch underfoot, resting upon frozen grass and weeds. I miss the feeling of Harris' surprisingly smooth palm against my own, but the warmth he's sharing with me is seriously no joke. I give his hand a squeeze right before we reach the top. He squeezes back.

I've got my usual chocolate malt in the other hand; Harris has his strawberry shake. He keeps taking sips, enough so that I'm sure it's mostly gone by now.

"Did you drink it all already?" I ask him as we make our way over to the cliff's edge.

Harris looks back at me, his green eyes wide. "Huh?"

I snort. "Your shake, is it—"

"You just wanna know if my lips taste like strawberry, huh? Is that it? Huh?"

It's cold enough—and I'm used to Harris enough—that there's no familiar heat flushing the back of my neck. But my stomach still flips just a little bit, a pleasant, nervous little flip. "You wish. Shut up."

"Ooh, 'shut up.' Someone's on fire today."

I laugh, and we sit down near the quarry's edge. I ignore the feeling of snow beginning to melt into the back of my jeans, and focus instead on the frozen quarry waters below.

"I wonder how much of it is frozen," Harris says aloud. He turns to look at me. "I was wondering if it *would* freeze, or if it was too toxic or something."

"Nah, pH levels don't affect water's freezing point. I don't think there's anything in there that would stop it, really."

"Your science knowledge is hot."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, I bet."

Harris wedges his cup in the snow. "Can I kiss my hot, doctor-to-be boyfriend now?"

"*May* I kiss my hot, doctor-to-be boyfrie—"

He cuts me off, pressing his lips to mine. I fumble behind me, trying to set down my malt without spilling it, before properly returning the gesture. Harris' hair feels completely different through the gloves, but I don't mind it. It's scratchier for sure, but I'm too happy to be here with him to complain. He gently nudges me onto the ground, and I let him guide me, till the back of my jacket presses against the ground, and my woolen beanie slips off just slightly. His body is warm, his mouth hot, his touch gentle.

We kiss for what could be forever. Snow melts into the back of my hair and jeans, leaving us lying in a wet pile of grassy dead mush. I don't even care. My hands are right up against the underside of Harris' jaw, and one of his knees is between my thighs. It's been too long since we've been like this, since I've felt his weight rest comfortably atop me, since I've felt our heartbeats sync as he brushes his thumbs across my cheeks.

He pulls away after a while, and we're both breathing a little heavier, our breath fogging up in front of our faces as we try to play it cool. "I love you," he says, leaning forward and pressing a peck against my forehead.

I tilt my chin back slightly and smile. "I love you too."

Harris goes on to press a kiss to my cheek. "I love you here." My jaw. "And here." The side of my mouth. "And here...." The tip of my nose. "Even here."

I don't have words for him. There's this warm, calm thrumming in my chest. My body is comfortably loose, more so than it's been in months past. "I love you *everywhere*."

"Simp," Harris says, and then kisses me once more. Despite the snow soaking in through my jeans, I'm not cold. I'm feverish. Harris' lips are even softer than I remembered, each small movement of his chin or hands or body opening me up, piece by piece, until I lie before him, completely exposed. He just keeps on kissing me; I just keep on kissing him back.

Out of everything I've ever done on a cliff's edge, this has to be my favorite.

disclaimer

Hi guys! This book is mlm (bxb). I typically don't write mlm, because while I'm queer and have consumed a lot of media about queer men written by queer men, I can't pretend to nail exactly the queer man's experience. It's like how like Casey McQuiston gets flack sometimes for having written *Red, White & Royal Blue*, because they aren't a cis queer man, or how Becky Albertalli got so much for *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* that she felt she had no choice but to out herself.

I sincerely hope that I am not misrepresenting this specific part of the greater queer community that I love and cherish. If you feel I am, please, please let me know. No queer person is a monolith; it's impossible to showcase everyone's experiences. But research can only do so much, and if my writing is not apt representation, then for the sake of my readers and myself, and for the sake of the quality of the novel, I want to correct any errors in my storytelling.

I would also like to note that I do not condone the fetishization of any person, especially young, vulnerable queer persons. Sometimes when (particularly, straight) women write something with two boys, it's done through a lens of both boys being seemingly attractive to a female audience. (There are tons of great essays on the romanticization, glorification, and fetishization of queer men in fiction.) I hope my lack of wanting these characters to be fetishized comes through. And as such, I will be deleting any overtly sexualized comments---questions like "who's the top" and such just aren't relevant. I hope you understand.

Just, honestly, I just couldn't imagine this book in any other way. The idea initially came to me when I saw a trailer for the 2013 film *The Kings of Summer* during a binge of season two of *House*, and was also in my own very-kinda-weird-very-very-fast-moving situationship. ONC 2023 has given me the means to try putting it

on paper after giving me the last important piece of the puzzle. (Yass, ONC!!!)

Please share/link/tag any queer authors you wish to share inline here, or feel free even to promote your own work in **this specific spot**. I want to build up other queer (take a shot every time I say 'queer') writers on this site, because I know how hard it can be to break through. So let's hype one another up! <3

Thanks for being here! I hope you enjoyed BOYS OF WEST DENTON.

WATTYS FAN CHOICE AWARD

Hey guys!!! I kinda need your help with something. BOYS OF WEST DENTON is one of three contenders for the brand new Wattys Fan Choice Award, and I need *your* help.

All you have to do is go to the Wattys official website (linked in my bio & convo page!), click BOWD, give your username, and you're done! Obviously you don't HAVE to do this. I would just love you forever and ever and ever and ever.

Also if you read this far, HI THANK YOU FOR BEING HERE I HOPE YOU ENJOYED AND I LOVE YOU OKAY BYE BYE BYE